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Marathon, Ohio

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University of Southern Mississippi

The University of Southern Mississippi

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by

Alan Guido Rossi, Jr.

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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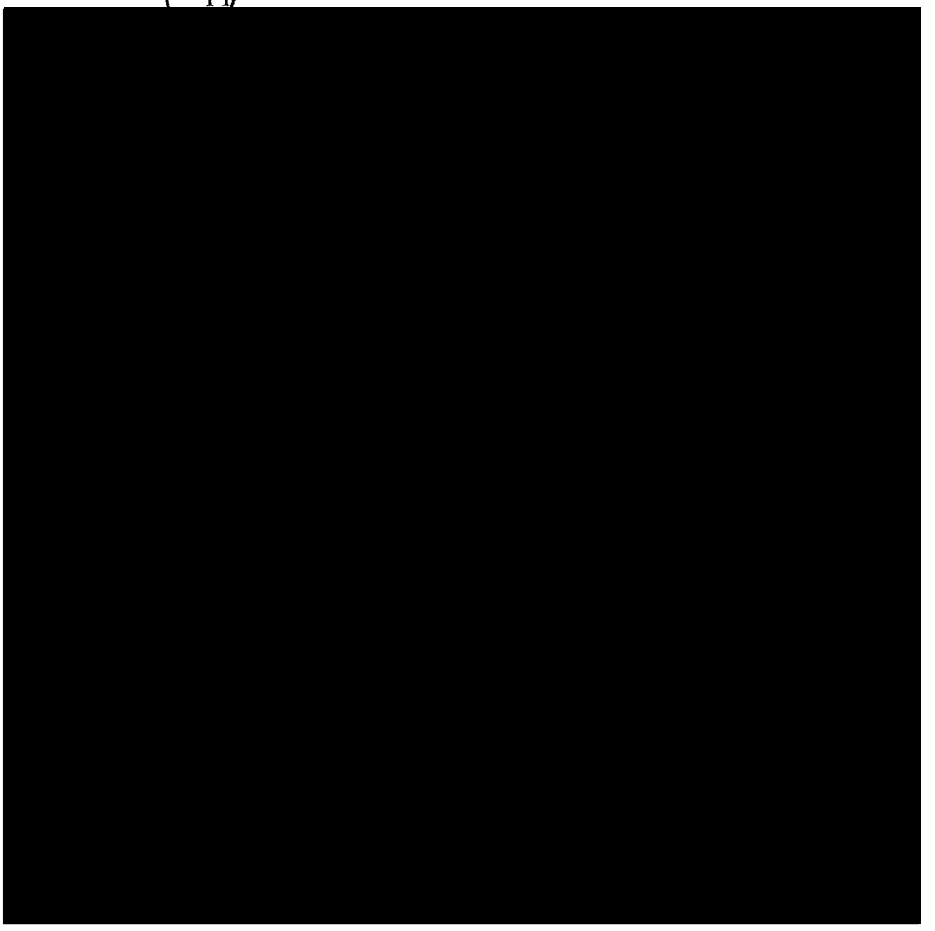

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ABSTRACT

MARATHON, OHIO

by Alan Guido Rossi

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Marathon, Ohio is an original collection of fiction, accompanied by a critical introduction. All of the stories were written between 2005 and 2008 at the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers. The stories are arranged for a thematic and formal effect, rather than by chronology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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"Blacktail" was originally published in *The Fourth River*.

"Time in Texas" was originally published in *The Journal*.

"Marathon, Ohio" was originally published in *Zone 3* and was an honorable mention in 2007 for AWP's Intro Journals Project Award.

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INTRODUCTION

World

The first introduction I wrote concerned how in this collection of stories I wanted to explore 'place' in writing. So I evoked my past: moves from rural Ohio to the suburbs of Columbus; summers at my grandparents' farm in Connecticut and the black dog we left there; years in Missouri woods, ticks on shoes, socks, shins; living on a hill near a cemetery in Dayton, watching the cityscape breathe at night; then out to West Texas, where I got another degree and got thrown in jail (the one autobiographical story here). As I wrote this introduction, I discovered that none of the stories were only about place; they were all about the fictional process. Instead of only exploring physical spaces, different regions of the country, meadows and forests, suburbia and city, and people in those places, I realized I was writing stories that dealt with the creation of places, the creation of fictions. I began again.

On one hand, all these stories have clear physical settings, a cornerstone of realism: mountains in Montana shadow the page; the dirt plains of West Texas stretch off forever, lined with telephone wire; Kentucky forests crouch and rivers run. And there are names, nouns like signposts: Blacktail and Marathon, Somerset and Cumberland, Winsted and Warren. Because what's a place without a name? The Midwest is covered here in detail, like the colors of a map: suburbs and cityscapes are alternately clean or industrial, bright and manicured or tired and grey, and then unfolds the countryside in obvious opposition to the urban with the greens of trees and rain-soaked dirt-roads. The rural is here as a false promise.

Setting, in other words, is a main character in all these pieces. But like any character, all these settings are made-up, conjured from scenes of movies, camping trips, album covers and postcards and paintings. Only the most important things stayed, I hope; only the shards of glass reflecting the moon.

Wittgenstein says, "The world is all that is the case." And William Gass, influenced by Wittgenstein (even taking in some of the hawk-faced philosopher's lectures), writes "If the esthetic aim of any fiction is the creation of a world, then the writer is creator – he is god – and the relation of the writer to his work represents in ideal form the relation of the fabled Creator to His creation." The worlds Gass creates aren't cityscapes or landscapes, but inscapes, terrains of inner life composed of language. Indeed, however many aging houses Gass plants in his worlds, however many smoking factories pollute and darken the sky, however many snow-covered fields lie quiet like the blank page, the only place for Gass is in the words. And the reader runs over Gass's words like he (the reader, poor reader) is a realist running through the world, able to sprint down roads, scrape knees, until he finds himself tumbling down through thoughts as if down a well – where's the road? – staring into Molly's shorts as they pass and once hitting bottom burrowing further into the idea of treating language like a lover. How many of us are bad lovers? Gass asks. How many are neglectful? How many have traded the world of words for the things words represent? Using language like a tool; making models? Most, I think.

In many of these stories, I wanted to make a unique world, and often the only way to do so was to create a unique sort of language for the world; a language that matched and evoked the physical setting; a language flat as the dust plains of West Texas or cold

as frozen Lake Winsted in Connecticut. I think many writers start with a character or with a sort of plot or situation or a set of actions and move on from there. I always start with voice: what I intuit the language of the piece to be, and I believe that in this way I'm concerned, not with realism, but, with a realistic depiction of a voice.

Voice

They say, Read and you'll find your voice. Or, You'll find your voice in someone else's, a little branch of your own. There's something to this. But complaints arise. Voices are freegame. Style is imitated. New names are pinned on old works. Carver and Hemingway steal themselves into workshops across the country from the other side. Earnest young writers (me) never see it coming: the clean sentence, the quick settings, the economy of language, and the clipped, stylized dialogue, so stylized in fact that you could never find a person that speaks like a character in a Carver or Hemingway story. Burroughs says, "Hemingway has been described as a master of dialogue. He isn't. No one talks like people in Hemingway's novels except people in Hemingway's novels." Worse is when people in your own novel start talking like people in Hemingway's.

This problem of imitative style isn't alone what concerns me. What does is that awful summary on the back of every book of Hemingway's still in print: "He did more to change the style of English prose than any other writer in the twentieth century." How this shows. What Hemingway did was fresh at the time, unique; now it feels like stories I read (and write) are infected by Carver and Hemingway; prose like a sack of bones I have to carry around and reassemble. There's a stiffness, a coldness. The thing needs life breathed into it and it needs, well, things: tire irons, cheese graters, garlic presses, fingernails, wood chips, sawdust, dead trees, cinderblocks, a cemetery wind, fishy air,

grass tickling knees, fleas on coats and in hair, winter cold like a dog bite. Often there's action, pure representation, the stuff for films: "He walked over to the door. She turned her back. Her black hair was down now. He went back into the room and got his suitcase. The window was open and it was cold. He closed the window in front of her, waited to see if she'd say anything, then he left." Where's the world? Where are the words? Not to say that there isn't a place in contemporary fiction for clear, clean writing, but the language of so many stories seems unloved.

Realism is a valid literary mode, and it's the only one I know how to do, but it poses problems for the writer, especially the young writer. It seems to me that the writer is like a guitar player; he or she may forget, may never see, that there's a whole neck of frets to play on, while playing the same rock chords over and over down on the third. So a certain kind of deflated and washed-out brand of Hemingway-Carver realism is put up on a pedestal, some goal, but the writer of realistic fiction needs to know of Jane Bowles and Ann Beattie, and this needs tempered with Gass and Elkin, and the newer group, Moody and Eggers and their clan, all writers who have a different take on realism, whose depicted realities are different, slightly askew, and whose language is fresh and waiting for a willing reader to look into it. The sort of combination I'm after is a transmutation of Gass' formal language ideals into a more representative (Hemingway-esque) mode. The starting place is the voice of a character.

Character

Many of the characters in this collection are either unrealized artists or faux-philosophers. They impose an order on the world while at the same time drawing from the physical world the images they need to create that world. For instance, in "Time in Texas," a man

out of jail in West Texas watches the dust and dirt plains as if from a prison; he's detached from the world and the world, in turn, is all dirt to him. In "Red River Gorge," the narrator becomes a forest ranger and moves into a cabin to complete his Thoreau-like idea of himself. In the title story, the narrator, again seeking change, moves from the city to a small Ohio town, which he believes represents simplicity and purity, things he needs in order to heal. These stories are about the consciousnesses of the characters, their emotional states often represented by the physical setting, a setting which they have chosen.

The goal in many of the first person stories is a goal I steal from Gass; that is, to create a consciousness on the page. Some think in terms of character. They want to create a character, a woman with grey hair in a bun, a sundress even at seventy, sandals, a cat in a harness on a leash; characters walk and talk, after all, and what's in her head, that's just another part of her, like a limb. But for first person, at least, it seems to me that the construction of a character is through that character's perception of the world; through the mind. So I think Gass is accurate when he says the aim of a fiction should be the creation of a consciousness, and not just of a character, but also of the work itself. For it is the story that takes on life of its own and becomes its own reality, a reality different from the reality out the bedroom window. This, of course, causes me problems. Secondary characters in my fiction often come out hazy, blurred, seen through a midnight fog. They're ghosts haunting my main guy; and where – help? – are their minds, their thoughts? Who are these people: the short beady-eyed man behind the meat counter; Fat Tommy with the shiatsu down the road; that girl hitchhiker; those twin boys? Who are they and what are they doing and why are they doing what they're doing? They seem

lost to me, too easily pawns I'm moving around. These characters in a first person narration get shorted, able to express themselves only in dialogue, action, through the mind of the main character. It's unfair, giving it all to create the mind, the language of just one person, picking only a few words out here and there, like a day-tripper in an apple orchard, for other characters.

Gass's idea of character is of almost no use for me. He calls a character a linguistic source on the page, a source of which much of the language of the text stands as a modifier. Fine for the formalist, but in creating more traditionally representative works, I have to use an older idea of character. Gardner is helpful here with his idea of character as a vivid apparition in the reader's mind. Somewhere along the way, a story forms from these bits of language, the try at a voice, the pictures of some other characters walking around, talking, feeling depressed or hated, isolated or loved wrongly, and if I'm lucky, because I never plan, never know where anything is going, a plot emerges, characters connect, say goodbye, get angry, get lost, guilt themselves and others, feel grave, healthful, ghostly and transparent, and maybe a story will be there at the end.

Story

Of the seven stories here, I think it best to start with the worst. The first I wrote, "Halloween," is buried toward the end of the collection because there was no way, not even in the name of showing how I grew as a writer, that I could possibly put it first. The story fails on almost every level: the kid is a disaster, a kid formed from impressions of kids I've seen on tv and in movies; the main character might be a little better. I don't even care to comment on most of the writing, but take this line that comes toward the end of the story, after the pumpkins on the main character's front porch have been smashed:

"I can't figure why they didn't take the candy, too. Molly might have had some theory, but I'm so tired of her popping into my head I don't try to formulate what it might be." There are bad lines here, but this one gets extra credit: "popping" and "formulate" together in one sentence must be some kind of sin. The story itself is contrived in all the usual ways: wife leaves husband to deal with kid, whom husband doesn't want to deal with, but he sort of comes around in the end. The setting is as characterless as the characters: straight suburbia, a place that some writers are excellent with, but I never find the right corners of.

The story "Time in Texas" is the only autobiographical story in the collection; this was the first story where I had found a voice and a setting that fit. The unnamed narrator is just out of jail; his narration is distant and flat, representative of his view of the world, and the setting of the story mimics this:

> Dogs dig holes in the dirt to keep cool. They pant and stand in water buckets. Flys buzz around the dogs' ears and birds wait on fences. Sometimes a dog will pass out because of the heat and we'll put it in the hospital. There's no real shade, just the tin roofs above some of the pens. Distant storms pass us by, clouds rolling up into the sky, puffed and white at first, then flattening out all dark and grey. Each day I wish one would hit us.

The story centers around the main character's detachment and voyeurism. He watches. He watches a woman at the animal shelter and turns her into some ideal; the woman he's involved with back in town, Mary Beth, he pushes away; he can't deal with realities; it's easier to keep things in his head. The character grows though, in a real way, a slow way, hesitant about leaving his cell. First, this growth comes from contact with a

dog at the shelter, and because of this contact, he tries to reach out to Mary Beth. It's too late, though, and he's left worse off, understanding that she was the only person that meant anything to him.

These stories are filled with small connections and disconnections. In "Marathon, Ohio," the embittered narrator who once left the small town of Marathon, and his wife, returns from the city defeated, self-righteous, and claiming to want solitude. He looks down on the townspeople, but as he runs through town, training for a marathon, he begins to find his place; as he runs through the town he creates it, picking what he can use. He runs to prove something to himself, though even he's not sure what, and when he fails in the actual marathon, he realizes it's not the race that's the thing, it's something about the people on the streets at night, the woman he runs with, how the town comes together; more than anything, it's his creation of the place and himself that he understands is important.

Likewise, the narrator of "Red River Gorge" seeks solitude in a cabin in Kentucky. He hikes through the woods and believes he's in touch with the natural world. He doesn't see much in people: "It seems to me that they don't see the world around them; they skim the surface, frantic, like a bug on water, forgetting how to live slow, quiet, deep in and among things. They speak as if they hadn't uttered a word in years, as though they alone know the park and they alone are the only ones with troubles. To me, their worries are loveless and trivial and barren. I know all these people; I choose to be alone." When he's forced into living with his diabetic father, things change. Unlike the narrator of "Marathon, Ohio," who comes to realize that it is his creation of the world and his self that is meaningful, the narrator here is forced into another's viewpoint, his

father's: in this way, he finds that his conception of the world is limited, even narrow-minded, somewhat bigoted – all the things he despised about his father. In this way, he comes closer to his father than he has ever been.

The collection begins with a depressing story, and in the middle of the collection the end of stories lift, rise up above muck and smallness, and the characters' consciousnesses expand; but as the collection progresses things get darker. "Blacktail" is the last of the stories with a slight hope at the end. I like the voice of that story, the quietness of it, the reticence of the narrator and his attachment to moments. The reflection on past moments is what defines that story, what defines the narrator and allows the narrator to show affection; this, I think, may come across as coldness, but really I feel that the narrator of "Blacktail" is affectionate, just in a reserved, odd, and confused way; he's affectionate after the fact, and for me anyway, that's why the story might be moving.

"Hill People" is a more straightforward plot-oriented story. The construction of "Hill People" initially centered on a cold, wintry landscape and a person lost in that landscape. What I didn't know was why he was lost out there. The story stayed a vision in my head, the language ready, a language based heavily in physical description, a sort of naturalism. When I figured out that Dean, the main character, had a mentally handicapped sister, the story was on the page in one evening: his mistreatment of his sister leads to his panic in the below-freezing woods and leads to his getting lost. It's his guilt for what he's done - giving her sleeping pills so that he can go hike and drink with a friend - that keeps him searching for her in sub-zero temperature. It's self-inflicted punishment: he won't allow himself in from the cold, and in the end, he succumbs to the

cold. Even though the reader can see all the love and guilt and shame in him, it's partly his own coldness that kills him.

A good bit of fiction, like life, relies on the luck of a word falling into place, shining up a sentence; but there's another side to this coin, and it's the reader who completes the story, fills in his or her own love, rereads a paragraph simply for the sound, the tongue touching each word, tasting them. And with luck, these stories are more than just words in the end; in the end, maybe they form some thing that points beyond words, maybe to some world the reader is terrified of or would want to live in. Above all, I hope this collection gives the reader worlds to occupy, words the reader wouldn't mind taking home, living with and in.

TIME IN TEXAS

Where I Work

I got stuck in Lubbock after the arrest. I'd been planning to move and had put in a request for a probation transfer. In the courtroom, the judge ignored the transfer request and gave me time at an outdoor animal shelter. I asked if he had any air-conditioned community service. He didn't like the joke and added on to my probation six months without transfer.

In the morning I work at a bicycle shop, and in the afternoon I do the shelter, during the hottest part of the day. The place lies outside of town on about ten acres of dead farmland. There are dusty rows of dog pens, two or three dogs to a pen, and several air-conditioned trailers for cats. I do the dogs. There's a horse that nobody, not even the owner of the shelter, can touch, it's been so badly beaten. There are two Chows that chew on the chain link fence if you come too close to their pen. One of the Chows got loose once and killed a beagle. The mean animals, the shy ones, those are the ones that got beat.

There's a shed turned into a makeshift animal hospital out behind the owner's house. The owner, Joe, is half-vet and he runs the whole place, goes around on a golf cart, kicking up dust and gravel. He's got a bad knee and has a hard time bending down. He's got deep set eyes and brown skin and must be around sixty. Prisoners come in the mornings to work for him. A bus brings them in. He pays them and talks with them and drives around on the golf cart making sure they're doing work. From what I can tell, they only work when he's looking. Volunteers and people like me come in the afternoons and evenings.

My Home

I live in an efficiency on Georges Street. The one window looks out onto the main drag of town. I've got a small fridge, a cooking surface and maroon carpet in there; a plant I water once a week and two chairs. The carpet is Mary Beth's. She's called for it several times and each time she wanted me to bring it to her. If I could've gotten the transfer, this wouldn't have mattered. She never would've known I was gone. I'm still here, though.

The last time she called about the rug, I said, Why would I bring it to you? If you want it, you can come and get it. You can be such an asshole, she said, and I pictured her neck all red. Texas girls play it cool mostly, but when they get mad, their necks go red, veins appear. She slammed down the phone.

She hasn't come to get the rug yet, so it's mine. I often lie on it and stare up at the ceiling. At night, cars pass and send angles of light sailing across the ceiling and the walls. Before dark, the blinds cut the sunset into the room. The difference between the rushing light of the headlights and stillness of the sunlight is something I take note of. When I watch long enough, I can see the sunlight creeping through the room, too.

I don't have a TV, so in the evenings I set a chair in front of the window and sit with a glass of milk and watch the street. I unplug the phone. Across the street is a building, all cinderblock, with a glass door. Painted on the cinderblock, in mural form, is a guy in a wheelchair throwing a basketball. The store sells super-powered wheelchairs to the handicapped and elderly. I watch a lot of people come up the ramp, some of them pushing themselves up with the old kind of wheelchair, and an hour later whirring out on

a motor, all smiles. I still can't figure why the painted wheelchair guy on the building has a basketball. He's not playing with anyone else. Who's he throwing it to?

Co-Workers

Dogs dig holes in the dirt to keep cool. They pant and stand in water buckets. Flys buzz around the dogs' ears and birds wait on fences. Sometimes a dog will pass out because of the heat and we'll put it in the hospital. There's no real shade, just the tin roofs above some of the pens. Distant storms pass us by, clouds rolling up into the sky, puffed and white at first, then flattening out all dark and grey. Each day I wish one would hit us.

This day I'm working with a guy wearing a cowboy hat. He's taking classes for domestic abuse, part of his probation. We put ointment on dog ears that have been chewed up by flies. The dogs don't like it, they try to shake it off, but they need it. Several only have a half-ear left. He holds the dogs while I put on the ointment.

What're you here for? Cowboy says.

Hold him, I say. Like this. I take the nape of the dog into my hands, pull back so its neck is straight and it wasn't able to move. I volunteer, I say.

He doesn't say anything at first, then, I got domestic abuse, but my lawyer's taking care of it. All I've got to do is take these classes.

I wipe a glob of ointment onto this dog's left ear, rub it in. Yeah, I say.

Yeah, these guys in these meetings are talking about how they're learning to control themselves. How when they want to hit somebody or something, they take deep breaths instead. I'm thinking, Jesus, I shouldn't be here. The lady keeps telling me to

share my feelings. I told her, I'm not like any of these people. You know, these people are totally different from me.

I can see that, I say. He lets go of the dog and it shakes. Slobber gets on my jeans and we move on to the next pen. Before we get there, he stops and drinks at the hose and hands it off to me. I drink and he points.

Who's that? he says. I follow his finger and find a girl named Chelsea, a girl I've been watching lately, about a hundred yards away near the Chow's pen, two big dogs leashed to her and giving her trouble.

She volunteers, I say.

One of the dogs, a tan Labrador, slips his collar and bolts from Chelsea. The place erupts. The dogs bark, some howl. The Lab goes up to pens, front paws on the chain link, trying to get at the other dogs, dust everywhere. Cowboy goes running after the loose Lab. Chelsea's trying to control the Huskie she's still got on a leash, but he's wild, thrashing. She yanks the Huskie to his pen, the dog yelping, and pushes him in. Cowboy's chasing the Lab, kicking up dirt, but it's not coming to him. I go to a nearby shed, grab a box of dog bones and shake the box. Half the dogs stare at me including the Lab. He rockets right for me and before I can even think he springs at me, knocking me over, sending the box of bones tumbling in the dirt.

The Women I Know

Just before sundown on Fridays, my mother, Cheryl, calls. She always calls at the same time, not by any clock, but as the sun's dropping and making long shadows on the street, windows reflecting orange. She doesn't say she wants to see how I am, she says she

wants to talk, but I know. I sit in front of the window and watch the street, the wheelchair building.

Have you been drinking green tea? she asks.

Just like you said.

It has healing properties, she says. You should do a toxic flush. Do you know your body has between fifteen to twenty pounds of fecal matter built up in it? Along the colon walls.

I feel good, I say. I feel great.

Are you exercising?

Every day. I've got that new job, working with animals.

That's right, she says. I forgot. That sounds great. You need to be doing things that are good for you physically and mentally.

That's why I've got the new job.

You sound so good, she says.

There's a pause in our conversation. A black man on a bicycle hops up on the curb and does a few tricks, spins and kicks, in front of the wheelchair store. He's got a cape on and has a long grey beard.

I've got to get going, I say.

It hasn't rained here in months, she says. She lives in Indiana, the place I thought I would transfer to, though now I don't know why I thought that. The place I wanted to go could've been anywhere, Indiana didn't matter. They say it won't rain for another week, she says.

The bearded black man gets off his bike and sits down in the middle of the sidewalk. He waves at cars and tosses a tennis ball up in the air and catches it. People walk by him, some switch to the other side of the street before they get to him. I've seen this man with the beard and cape before, on other streets. He's never with anyone else, but he's always waving to people, smiling. Like he knows something. Now he's looking up at my window.

Cheryl, I've got to go, I say, wanting to watch the bearded black man, maybe shout down to him to come up.

Okay, she says. Pray for rain. God knows we need it.

I will, I say, and hang up fast, but the black man is already on his bike. I unplug the phone and watch out the window.

*

Mary Beth, though she hangs up on me, won't stop calling me, either. A couple days after watching the black man and his bike tricks, she comes over. It's during the evening, the only time I'm home really, and I believe she's finally come for her rug.

She knocks on my door and I look out through the peep hole. She has one of her homemade dresses on, a cream thing that goes down just below the knees. She hates her knees. She says they're wrinkled. But she's always worn dresses, and when I first met her, I had asked if she ever wore normal clothes. What are normal clothes? she had said.

I admire her through the peephole, and stay quiet, hoping she will, too.

I know you're home, she says. I saw your eye cover up the little hole.

I move the two chairs and the plant to the corner of the room. I get on my knees and roll up the rug. Mary Beth knocks harder.

Hold on, I say, setting the rug next to the door and then opening the door.

Mary Beth looks at me. She picks up a box she has next to her in the hall. The rug slides down the wall and into her way. She steps over it and stands in the middle of the room, hugging the box to her chest.

Where do you want this? she says, smiling.

Where do I want what?

She looks at me, sets the box in the middle of the room. She goes out and brings in another box. One has a small tv and radio in it. The other has an answering machine and various pictures and candles.

What is this? I say.

I thought you could use some things. Look, we can put the TV in the corner. I've got you some pans in here. She pulls a pot out and sticks a lid on it.

I can't use some things, I say.

You don't have anything in this place.

I hate when you do this shit.

This isn't how people live, she says, her neck and face getting red. This is how a child lives. You're a grown man.

We're not together anymore, I say. I don't want you or your things. Take your rug and your boxes.

She looks at me and walks over to the window. She stares out the window, arms folded across her chest. A semi passes on the street. Her face gets red. She looks beautiful that way, flushed and full looking, not pale.

You should get outside more, I say. You could use a little sun.

Jesus, Michael, she says, walking past me. Keep the rug.

I don't want the fucking rug, I say, calling after her.

Break Time

The first two hours I'm at the shelter, I clean up shit, and do waters, and scrub bowls. While I work, I catch glimpses of Chelsea. I make sure to keep my eyes covered by the brim of my Cubs hat, paying attention to anything but her – a dog, a bucket, the horizon, when she comes my way – I don't know why I do this, I could easily go up to her, but the thought of Mary Beth being in the same town, maybe seeing me with someone else is something I don't want. Two hours in, I take a break, and stand in the shade of a pin oak that reaches over a fence.

Today on my break, there's the sound of the wind up in the oak and I look out over the fence. My hands ache from holding a shovel. Along with cleaning up cages, I'm also doing over the long gravel driveway, something the prisoners were supposed to do. The pile of gravel has been there for two weeks though, so I started in on it. Now my hands burn from holding the wood-handled shovel, and I touch them to the cool of the smooth tree trunk. I haven't done real work in a long time, but I like the way my hands feel now, the way the blistered parts pulse. I can feel the pulsing in my head.

I blow on the palm of my right hand. Three birds light on the fence near me, avoiding the barbed wire. They stare at me; one's missing an eye and keeps its good eye turned toward me. Some days I'll catch them carrying away dead mice I've tossed over the fence. Today they only watch, three black dots on the horizon, farm fields of dirt

stretching away behind them. I look out across the fields and wonder what Mary Beth is doing, and far down on the fence-line, I see Chelsea dumping dirty water from a bucket.

Chelsea

I first saw Chelsea when she was trying to get the horse to come to her. She stood at the edge of the barbed-wire fence, a fence that enclosed a circular area of grass. She walked up to the fence, not the horse, then started edging her way toward the animal. I was filling up a water bucket and overfilled it onto my jeans and sneakers. She didn't look over. She kept edging toward the horse, holding out some hay, and it moved away from her, pulling grass from the ground. I watched how patient she was, and I imagined that's how she would be in bed, gentle movements, small give-and-take love. I kept watching. She made smaller and smaller movements, like the smaller the step she took, the slower she took it, the easier for the horse not to notice. The horse walked away. Chelsea looked around to see if anyone saw. She didn't see me huddled against the main trailer, just a part of the scenery, and then she walked away too.

Her second day at the shelter, she got bit by a Rottweiler mix; I watched it happen from the pin oak, on my break. She looked small in the distance, heat shimmering up from the ground, distorting her. She stepped into a pen, opening the gate. She was being too cautious about it. The dog's hair stood-up, razor-backed. It backed away. She edged into the pen and the dog backed against the fence. I didn't know what she was trying to get at in the pen, maybe an over-turned water. As soon as she moved toward the dog, it sprang. It clamped to her arm and she yelled. I stood watching the whole thing, not doing a thing, the dog clamped to her arm. Joe was nearby. Chelsea yelled again. He

came running. He sprayed the dog with a hose and it ran to its doghouse at the back of the pen. Chelsea came running out. Blood dripped down her arm and I could hear her saying how it was her fault. There was a wind up, stirring the dirt roads of the shelter, but I could hear her.

It was my fault, she said.

That little bastard, Joe said.

I didn't let him smell me, she said. I was too nervous.

He's not a bad dog, Joe said. But I've had problems with him.

It was me, she said. Joe took her arm in his hands and looked at it. He helped her into the golf cart and they drove off to the makeshift hospital behind the house.

I cursed myself for just standing there, for freezing, and went home early.

Texas Heat

It gets too hot to work on a Tuesday, and I take the hose I use to fill up the waters and spray it straight up in the air, raining down on me, then on the dogs. Water drips from the chain link fences and the tin roofs. Some of the dogs run away, some let me spray them. Everything's still. The dust dies down and the sun won't go down. Texas is the only place I've been where time seems to ease up, slow down, the heat baking everything dead. At one cage, I spray a black mutt and he chomps at the stream of water, chases it around. He's never let me touch him, but when I pass by his cage again with the water hose, he wags his tail. I spray into the cage again, watch him chase the water, biting at the stream. It must've been something his owners once did. I spray more and Joe comes up behind me.

That's his secret, he says. I couldn't get him to play with anything when he came in. He loves water though. He stands in his water bucket when it gets too hot.

As soon as I clean it, he's right back in, I say.

I stand in water buckets too, Joe says. Clean ones especially. I look at Joe quick, but he's turned away. I hear him laugh. A truck pulls into the front of the shelter, drives in on the gravel, the wheels crunching the stones. Joe squints, puts his hand up to shade out the sun. Can you be here this weekend? he says. I've got about twenty kids coming in, like a field trip.

I stick the hose between the black dog's fence. The dog wags his tail, waiting. His mouth hangs open, smiling, and there's yellow gunk on his teeth.

You don't have to, Joe says. It's not part of your service.

I want to ask if Chelsea will be around, but don't. Yeah, I say. I can be here.

Joe starts walking toward the entrance, where the truck pulled in. I'll give you double hours, he says. Be here around eight in the morning. In the distance, a man in a baseball hat steps out of the truck, carries a large dog in his arms. A small brown woman walks by his side. Joe's feet raise dust when he walks, one foot dragging some, and as he meets them, he steers them toward the hospital.

Jail Time

There were five of us in the holding cell, one other white guy. We each had a metal bunk with sheets and a pillow. There was a stainless steal urinal and sink and mirror. The mirror was scratched and bent, and you couldn't have seen yourself in it if you wanted to. There was a phone nobody knew how to work. The other white guy kept trying it. He

got into with this big black guy, the black guy telling him to stop fucking dialing. We need a code for it, the black guy said. And we don't have one.

I've got a code, the white guy said.

You don't have a thing.

I've got a fucking code from my buddy in another cell.

Right then, the white guy got his nose broken by a straight right hand. Some guards got there quick and took him away, blood all over his face and shirt, his nose out of place, looking like a piece of warm red clay.

The black guy kept saying that it was self-defense and he asked each of us, didn't we see the white guy swing first. We were all quiet and all said yes, we saw the white guy swing first. He paced around the cell in the middle of all the bunks. A Mexican kid had sat up on his bunk and was looking at me. He had a white film at the corners of his mouth and wore sunglasses, but I could see his eyes wide through the lenses. I lay back on the metal bed, a dirty pillow beneath me, and pretended to sleep. I peeked once and saw the Mexican kid lying back, too.

With my eyes closed, I could hear the pacing guy breathing, his shuffling feet. I hated the sound and to block it out I thought about Mary Beth sewing her dresses, how I always wanted her to wear something else. In the cell though, I loved the thought of those dresses, her wrinkled knees and fingers with tiny pin pricks; of her asking me to live with her and how maybe I should've said yes. I kept replaying things like that. It took forever to get out of there.

Visiting Hours

I call Mary Beth and tell her to come over and see the place. What I've done to it. She's quiet on the phone, doesn't say anything at first, then says *okay* and hangs up.

I wait for her by the window. She parallel parks her black Corolla behind a big white truck and gets out of the car. Watching from my window, she could be anyone. A ponytailed girl with sandals and these flowery summer dresses. But somehow she's Mary Beth and I know her. She was almost my Mary Beth and now I feel like I owe her something.

When she knocks, I let her in the room, opening the door and moving with it, so that she can step in. She wears sunglasses that she wasn't wearing on the street a minute earlier. She goes to the window and sits on the sill, takes off the glasses and puts them on top of her head. She glances at the room then looks out the window.

Tv's in the corner, I say. I've got the pots put away. I open up a cabinet and she raises her head to look.

You don't have to keep this stuff, she says.

I don't want you to feel bad, I say.

Is that so? she says.

Yeah, I say.

She's quiet for a minute, looking out the window. What's that smokestack? she says.

I shake my head.

There, she says, pointing out the window at a hard angle.

I come up next to her, look out the window the direction she's looking. There's a brick smokestack, black against the sky. I didn't know I could see that from here, I say.

Let's go, she says.

We walk to the smokestack. When we get there, the sun's gone down and a yellow moon comes up all big and hazy above the grain warehouses. We have to squeeze through an opening in a fence to get to the smokestack, and we do. She holds her dress close to her body so it won't rip and I wish I was holding the dress against her. Inside the fence, she picks up a broken screwdriver, walks up to the smokestack and chips at the brick with it. Up close, the smokestack isn't as impressive, it's worn and cracking, pieces of brick on the ground.

I stand behind Mary Beth. She turns around and tosses the screwdriver past me, into the empty lot. It lands in a tuft of grass that's broken through the cement. Everywhere, cement and brick crumbles, grass and small trees breaking through.

The main building attached to the smokestack is missing a back wall. There's a window without glass and you can look through it and out the back of the building far down to a Seven-Eleven. Mary Beth goes in. I stay outside the building.

Your place still looks like shit, she says, looking at me through the broken window. Why don't you put up some decorations?

It's temporary, I say. I'm not staying there, so why do anything with it.

If that's how you see it, she says. She walks out of the building back to the fence. I follow.

Where are you going? I say.

Home.

Why'd we come here?

I don't know, she says. Sorry for wasting your time.

Hold on, I say. I'm trying here.

Why? she says. Why'd you start this at all?

I don't know what to say. When we get to her car, she gets in. I grab her hard by the arm.

Get off, she says. That hurts.

I can't think. I hold her hard by the arm. She yanks out of my grip, laughs and shakes her head. She drives off without saying anything.

Mud Storm

I'm at the shelter by eight o'clock on Saturday morning. The sun's up on one side of the sky and on the other, there's a storm riding in. Joe stands at the back of the land, staring at the clouds. Lightning flickers. Two airplane towers disappear in the far off rain and dark.

I think we'll call this off today, Joe says. Chelsea's standing near him, along with two other men. One of them is the domestic abuse Cowboy. He's talking to Chelsea. Looking at the two of them, at Joe leaning hard on his right leg, I remember Mary Beth asking if she could volunteer, work here with me. Just to be closer. That was after jail, after she asked me to live with her. I told her I didn't think it was a good idea. I didn't think she'd fit in. Now I don't know if that's true or not, if I really didn't think she'd fit in, or if it was something else. I don't know what I wanted.

Cowboy leans closer to Chelsea, telling her how he wished there wasn't this storm coming. He was looking forward to getting double hours. She leans away from him, crosses her arms across her chest, her red hair in her face in the wind. And for a minute, I wish there wasn't this storm either. I was going to ask Chelsea to help me with this old donkey we have, was going to have her help the kids feed the donkey while I held it, but watching her all closed up to Cowboy, I don't really want to get to know Chelsea. Because she'll never be what I want. And even if I don't like Cowboy all that much, I don't like how she's ignoring him either. I'd rather let her be whatever she is in my head then let her go.

Joe tells everyone to go home. Me and Cowboy stay on with him though. The winds picks up. Dust flies around, into our eyes, rises up into the sky. We hurry, putting the puppies we had out for the kids back in the puppy house. After the puppies, we stand under a trailer's awning, watching the storm coming. We don't talk. Cowboy sits near a Huskies' pen and scratches the animals' ear through the fence. Joe looks toward the highway, like he's trying hard to see into the storm. I stand under the awning with Joe, and even though Cowboy isn't ten feet from me and Joe's right there, I'm distant from them both. Neither of them, nobody really, nobody except Mary Beth matters to me.

By the time the storm hits, it's dropping mud from the sky along with rain. Cowboy comes over to where we are, tries to talk to Joe but Joe's not listening. Cowboy stops and the rain comes harder. Thunder cracks then rumbles. Some of the dogs huddle in their pens, under their awnings if they have them or in their dog houses. The black mutt, the same one that chomps at the hose water, is out even in the rain. I watch him

and think that I could bring him home. With his front legs, he pulls himself on top of his doghouse. He stands on top of the doghouse and barks at nothing in the rain and mud.

HILL PEOPLE

It was unnaturally cold for early November, a strange cold snap, and Dean hated that it came on the weekend he had off from the hardware store. When he pulled the truck into the driveway, there was enough light to see the frozen lake through the trees. Ice coated the trees from a storm earlier in the week. On the radio, the weatherman was saying that it would get below zero again. The night before it was fifteen below; it was supposed to get colder.

Inside, in the family room, Claire had the TV cranked up so loud that the noise filled the house. She was sitting on the sofa with Gypsy, Dean's Australian shepherd, and was wrapped in two blankets. A half-drunk bottle of orange Gatorade and a box of cookies sat on the coffee table. Three logs lay near the fireplace; she wanted a fire. It was cold inside, the place was a mess, and Dean cursed Claire in his head.

Turn the TV down, Dean said, walking into the kitchen. He stopped at the thermostat and turned it from sixty to seventy. Did you remember to turn up the heat when I left this morning?

Claire turned on the sofa and looked at him, wiping her dark bangs out of her eyes. I didn't know *you* were home, she said.

That's because you've got the TV on too loud, Dean said. The TV got quieter.

Claire had been living with him since the summer. She was thirty-five and before moving in with Dean, she had been living with their mother in town because she couldn't live on her own. She was mentally handicapped and had diabetes. What Dean told people, when they were brave enough to ask, was that she had the mental capacity of about an eight year old, though sometimes she seemed older, sometimes younger. He

imagined that was what all kids must be like. Above all, she seemed to Dean like a kid still.

From a drawer in the kitchen, Dean got out a syringe and the small bottle of insulin for Claire's shot. He prepared the shot, cleaned the syringe with alcohol and then called her into the kitchen. She came and lifted up her right arm and began to take off her shirt. Dean grabbed her hard by the shoulders and spun her around.

Oh, that hurts, she said.

He told her they needed to do a new spot and he turned her around so that her back was to him and he pulled up the tail of her shirt. The shirt was pink with the words *Cowgirls Don't Get the Blues* on it. She wore it with a pair of blue jeans tucked into cowboy boots. She had dark hair and the same haircut she had always had, a bob with bangs that covered her eyes.

Dean pinched the fatty skin on the side of her back above her jeans and inserted the needle and pushed the plunger down. Then he rubbed the spot with an alcohol dipped cotton ball. Claire pulled her shirt down.

What do you want to eat tonight? he said.

She looked at him, frowning. I thought we were going to mom's tonight. You said we were going to mom's and she was going to make us steaks and then we would have Slurpee's on the way home.

That's next week, Dean said.

You said we were going to mom's for steaks.

No I didn't, Dean said, cleaning the syringe with alcohol and then sticking it back in the drawer. I just talked to mom yesterday, he said. We made plans for next week.

That's not what you said, Claire said. You said we were having steaks with her tonight. I want to call her. That's not what you said.

You can call her, Dean said. You can call her all you want. She'll tell you same thing. So what do you want for dinner?

Claire crossed her arms and huffed. Whatever you want, she said, and stamped off to the family room. Dean opened the fridge and took out a Coke. The volume on the TV went up and Dean heard a woman's voice talking about fall colors and dresses.

Turn that down, Claire, Dean said.

She didn't answer him. Dean put the Coke down and went into the family room and turned the volume down on the TV. How about lasagna? he said.

If that's what you want, she said.

*

That summer, Dean had gotten a promotion at the hardware store and became a manager. For years, he had wanted to move out of town to be near Tommy Haskell's place and to be able to hunt and go on hikes whenever he wanted. With the promotion, he finally got the chance. The house he found was a one-storey, two bedroom two hours north of Hartford and an hour north of the small town of Winsted, where Dean worked. It sat, along with a few other small houses, near an oblong lake deep in the woods. A gravel road branched off from a county highway and wound through the woods to Dean's property. His house was hard to find, hidden in the trees, and Dean was proud of it.

Claire had asked to move in that summer when she found out he was living somewhere new. It was unexpected, and Dean didn't like it at first, it might ruin this new place for him, but he did want to help his mother out, so he told Claire, and their mother,

that he wanted her to stay with him, too. Along with managing the hardware store, he now had other things to worry about: his mother's diabetes worsened, doctor's bills piled up, and he had to help his mother find a caregiver to help out around her house in town. And there was Claire. Their mother had tried to get Claire her own place years ago, but she got lost on her medication and insulin shots, stopped eating properly, and the whole thing ended with her being malnourished and dehydrated in the hospital.

*

After eating dinner, Dean told Claire to let Gypsy out a minute before she went to bed. Then he went to his bedroom and checked invoices online for the hardware store. He didn't want to have anything to worry about for the weekend. He looked out the window into the woods; his reflection was superimposed on the dark forest.

He remembered their mother telling them to be careful when he and Claire went into the woods. She told them to watch for ticks in their socks, watch for bobcats, and she told them not to go past the creek in the forest because beyond the creek were the hill people. During the daytime, she explained, the hill people didn't cross the creek boundary, so it was safe up to the creek, but at night, they came to the edge of the forest and watched the houses. She told them that because the hill people lived alone in the forest, they were always sick, and their coughs could be heard at night. When they went out together, even though Claire was older, she was Dean's charge and he was her protection from the hill people. He brought a bb-gun when they went out and listened for coughing and she pointed out places to shoot, hill people scurrying behind trees and bushes.

Dean thought that now Claire was again his charge, living in his house. He heard her talking on the phone from the family room and sat back in his desk chair and listened. Claire asked their mother whether they were supposed to have dinner tonight. A moment later, her cowboy boots clunked down the hallway and she stood in his doorframe, one hand on her hip, her head cocked, and the other hand dangling the phone for Dean.

Mom wants to talk to you.

Dean took the phone. While standing, Claire began to take off her cowboy boots. He covered the mouthpiece.

Hey, do you remember the hill people? Dean said. That story mom used to tell us.

Claire's eyes went wide. Shut up, Dean, she said.

He didn't understand. You don't? he said.

I remember you scaring me about it all, she said. I remember you used to have that bb-gun that you took everywhere. So what?

Just asking, he said. Get ready for bed. Claire went and when he heard the bathroom sink run water, he said hello.

Have you been taking that St. John's Wart? his mother said. I've read things that say it really evens people's moods out.

I haven't picked up any yet.

You should. You sounded frustrated the last time I talked with you. You should get some for Claire, too. I think it would help with her moods. Have you both been getting outside and doing fun things? That's important. You should do something with Tom Haskell.

His mother continued talking, but he wasn't listening. On the computer, he clicked through invoice information for the store. He needed to ask his mother if she had been billed by the hospital, but he would let that pass for now. It could wait.

I haven't seen Tom in forever, she said.

You saw him this summer.

His mother paused. You know, Claire seemed confused just now, she said.

Dean turned off the computer. Stop being so worried, he said. She just got her dates mixed up. She was upset we weren't coming to your house for dinner tonight.

You're welcome here anytime, she said. Anytime you both want to stay here.

I know.

Has she been keeping up with chores? I could come up there and keep her busy for a day or two.

It's okay. She's fine. We're both fine here. Don't worry about anything. How're you? Are you feeling okay?

I get tired, she said. I sleep a lot during the day. I'm turning into a housecat.

Well, that's what you need. That's the point of all this.

Claire came into the room again and Dean was glad for it. He didn't want to talk to his mother anymore, didn't want to be stressed or worried about anything else for the rest of the weekend. Claire had pajamas on, pale blue pants, and a long white t-shirt. Dean said goodnight and goodbye to his mother and then handed the phone to Claire.

We're coming next Friday, she said into the phone. For steaks, right? Dean walked out of the room and got himself ready for bed.

*

He woke in the middle of the night to the yelps of a dog outside. He thought it was some stray picking up Gypsy's scent, barking at the back of the house, and he tried to go back to sleep, but the barks wouldn't stop. He got up. The house was dark cold, and he walked on the cold wood floors in bare feet. He called out for Gypsy.

You got a friend outside? he said. You got a date waiting on you?

It was only after checking the laundry room, Gypsy's dog-bed, and the hall closet that he really woke up and recognized Gypsy's bark. It was Gypsy outside.

He went to the back of the house and saw the dog sitting at the glass back door, shivering. When she saw him, she scraped at the glass with a paw and barked once, then looked into the woods. The glass of the door was smeared with slobber and dirt. Dean's first thought wasn't to get the dog, but to get Claire, to drag her out of bed to show her the dog. To show her what she did and then put *her* outside. He imagined watching her freeze from some dark corner of the house, seeing her there at the glass door, her body numb against the black woods. He thought of pushing her head into the frozen dog bowl. Dean tried to stop himself. His face was hot and he had his right hand tightened into a fist. He let it go. There was no reason to think such things.

He let Gypsy in and she ran to the laundry room, got a long drink, then followed Dean to Claire's room. He opened the door and knocked loud. Claire woke up. Dean flicked on the light. Her room was a mess, pants and underwear and shoes without matches scattered on the floor. Two old insulin syringes were under the edge of the bed. Next to the syringes was his tire gauge. He had been looking for it for weeks and had to buy a new one. There were yogurt containers, moldy bowls of applesauce, and a half dozen of Dean's whiskey glasses, two of them half-filled with orange juice.

What do you want? Claire said, using her irritated voice, brushing her bangs out of her face. I'm trying to sleep.

Don't get all snappy right now, Dean said. You left Gypsy outside all night. Do you know how fucking cold it is?

I forgot, okay. I'm trying to get some sleep, okay?

Look, Dean said, moving so she could see Gypsy.

She doesn't look cold.

Don't be so stupid, Claire. It's below zero out there. Of course she's fucking cold.

Don't call me stupid.

Why not? Dean said, and he was aware of his anger rising up again, his face hot, his lower lip pressed in under his front teeth. A smart person doesn't leave the fucking dog outside to die. That's what a stupid person does. I'll call you stupid as long as you continue to do stupid things.

You're a fucker, Dean, she said, and grabbed a spoon, knocking over a bowl of moldy applesauce. She threw the spoon and hit him in the arm.

Dean wanted to pick up the spoon, push it into her face, ask her if she wanted to throw it at him again. He wanted to push it against her forehead and break the skin with the edges of the dull metal. Pick it up, he said, trying to calm down, wishing he didn't get so angry. He went to the bed and grabbed her hard by the arm, pulling her up.

Let me go, she said. I was about to say I'm sorry.

You got to use your head, he said. If you want the money mom gives you, then you have to help out right. You leave the dog out, your room is a mess.

Claire pulled out of his grip, petted Gypsy on the head, apologized to her, and flipped off the light. Okay, she said, and got back in bed. I'll clean it.

Dean flipped on the light again and went to her bed and handed her three pills from her nightstand. Take these, he said.

I'm not supposed to take that many, she said. Mom said I should only take a half or if I really need it a whole one.

You'll never get back to sleep, Dean said. This will help.

She looked at him.

It's okay. You know how mom is.

She took them without water and then covered up with blankets.

Did you swallow them all? Dean said. Let me see.

She opened her mouth wide, her bangs flipping up, revealing her forehead. There was a chalky coating covering her tongue. I just chewed them, she said.

Dean smiled. You shouldn't chew them, he said.

Why not? I always chew them.

You're supposed to swallow them, Dean said. Nevermind. It doesn't matter.

Dean flipped the light off again and closed the door of the room.

In his room, he let Gypsy onto the bed. Her body shivered. He covered her in blankets and rubbed her cold ears. There was the smell of pine in her coat. After a while, Gypsy smiled and Dean felt that he should go to Claire's room and tell her goodnight and sleep tight, kiss her on the head, but he had gotten tired and the dog had warmed up and he fell asleep.

*

The next morning, Dean was up by nine. He put on long underwear, jeans, thick wool socks, and his work boots. On top, he wore a sweater and a plaid jacket Tommy Haskell had given him the year before. Dean fed Gypsy in the laundry room, checked on Claire, still asleep, and then was out.

Flat grey sky pressed down on the frozen surface of the lake. Gypsy trotted along the bank, puffs of hot breath coming from her snout. Dean rubbed his hands in his pockets, warming them against his thighs.

He looked back at the house once and could just see it through the bare trees, the dark limbs obscuring the light from the kitchen sink window. It was the only light on in the house. His truck, a red F-150, sat in the driveway. It seemed the only color among the brown and grey land. In the morning sun, the thin coating of ice made everything glint and shine. Trees rattled and creaked in the wind. Dean rubbed his hands in his pockets again. He had forgotten his gloves, but he didn't want to go back. Claire wasn't up yet, but she would be soon, and he didn't want to see her.

Dean and Gypsy walked along the lake and then cut off into the trees, heading toward Haskell's house on the other side of the water. It was an hour hike, four miles, and Dean didn't know the area well, but he knew how to get to Haskell's, a place high up on a hill that overlooked the lake. It was a rough hike through the woods without a trail, undergrowth and downed trees and collapsed wire fences, but Dean liked the hike and used it work out his frustrations.

*

Dean smelled burning cedar beneath the evergreen. It came from Haskell's place. He pulled himself up a slope by a tree branch, a broken limb stabbing the palm of his hand.

Ahead of him, the dog sniffed at something, her head buried in the stump of a rotting tree. She dug up dirt, and Dean saw rusted barbed wire, the color of dried blood, entangling the stump. He thought the dog might snag her paw on the wire, so he whistled quick, two fingers pressed against his tongue, and Gypsy looked and then trotted on, further up into the forest. Dean followed, beginning to work up a sweat that was cold in the wind. Ahead of him a metal sign, yellowed and faded, said No Trespassing. Dean kept hiking, the ground going up, getting steeper. The hike, being outside in cold, working his legs and back, was cleaning him out. Whatever anger he had toward Claire drained away when he went on a long hike, like he worked it out of himself. The night before didn't even seem so bad now.

Dean slipped on a patch of ice and caught himself on a birch tree trunk. His ankle felt wonky and he rested on a downed log and rubbed it. From the elevated spot in the woods, the frozen lake looked like a dull mirror. He thought about the story of the hill people.

When he was young, Dean used to watch out his bedroom window at night, staring hard into the woods behind their house, not so different from the house he lived in now. In the spaces between trees, he'd catch glimpses of pale faces, the hill people watching, or he'd hear a child's coughing coming from the woods. He later learned that their mother took the hill people from a horror movie. His mother meant the hill people to be fun, scary, but fun, and before she said goodnight, she'd come into his room when the lights were out, coughing, and then tickle Dean until he couldn't breathe. She would laugh and hug him and say goodnight. When she left the room though, and the lights went out, he'd see the flashes of faces down in the trees, hear the coughing coming from

nowhere. He'd hold his BB gun close to his chest in bed, feeling his heart beating up through his crossed arms, not able to sleep, and he'd think of Claire alone in her room. On those nights, he'd go to Claire's room and look in on her to make sure she was still in bed. Watching her through the crack in her door, a ray of hall light across the foot of her bed, he'd feel relief seeing her sleeping, and he'd convince himself that the faces he'd seen weren't really there. He'd stay at her door, though, BB gun in hand, and keep his eyes on her; if he looked at her, he couldn't lose her.

In the daytime, Dean and Claire often went to the creek, but never crossed. He and Tommy Haskell and Claire fished at the creek or played hide-and-seek or tag. Tommy was Dean's age, first grade, and he liked Claire. The two held hands in the woods when they thought Dean wasn't looking and one time, Dean caught them kissing behind a boulder.

Dean hadn't said anything when he had found them, but he was mad. Mad at Claire for paying so much attention to Tommy. So he waded out in the creek where Claire could see. He had never been beyond the creek before. Holding his fishing pole above the water, his hand shook and the rod vibrated, and when Claire came running, he kept wading to the other side. He looked hard at the other shore, wondering when he would see any of the hill people appearing.

Where are you going? she said. You can't go over there.

I can do whatever I want, Dean said.

She had started crying, saying that he shouldn't cross. Dean stood in the middle of the clear running water. He cast his line once.

Claire shouted at him. Stop it, Dean, she said. I don't know what you're doing.

Dean came back, glad she was yelling for him, and Claire helped him onto shore, pulling him and hugging him and telling him not to go across. Tommy Haskell was saying, It's okay. Claire, what's wrong? What's wrong? Dean shrugged his shoulders.

Not long after that, things with Claire changed. She was held behind in second grade and was tested by doctors. Dean remembered going to doctors' offices and waiting in waiting rooms. Claire stopped going to regular classes and started going to special ed classes. There were kids with Down Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy and they frightened Dean.

For a while, Dean and Haskell and Claire still hiked the woods together and didn't pass beyond the creek. Then Dean met older boys who knew about a cave on the other side of the water. He and Tommy would go and leave Claire at the creek crying. Dean tried explaining to her that the hill people were a story. They weren't real, they were pretend, he'd tell her. Mom made them up because she can see the creek from the house, he'd say. She's just making sure we're safe. He'd tell her this, but it didn't matter. Claire cried anyway. He now understood that she had cried because he was leaving her, because they were not going to be together anymore, because, even though he would always be the younger one, he was passing her by, everyone was, and she sensed it.

*

The last part of the hike to Haskell's place was steep and Dean lost all worry of Claire. The woods suddenly ended and the land above cut clean away, leaving a rock wall twenty feet high. He got to use climbing skills he had mastered in college, only he didn't have to be in shape and his fingers didn't need to be so strong and calloused as it only took a minute to make the climb. The dog took the long way around, running along a trail, and

waited while Dean scaled the rock wall. There was no ice on the wall; it must've fallen at a hard angle. Dean found a good hold in the rock, pulled his upper body into place, both his feet finding footholds. He hung there a minute, letting his feet go, the muscles in his forearms burning. He did a pull-up. Then he swung his right leg and arm up the wall, made a similar grab with his left hand, and in two more easy moves he scaled the wall and pulled himself onto Haskell's property. He wiped his hands on his jeans, leaving dusty hand imprints on his pants. Gypsy trotted ahead to Haskell's garage door.

*

She was out at the lake the other day, Haskell said. She was tossing rocks onto the ice.

You're full of shit, Dean said. You're messing with me.

I'm not, Haskell said. She was out there. I saw her with the binoculars.

I don't know how many times I told her to not go out there without me.

Dean sat on the rug in front of the fire Haskell always had going. He leaned his back against the end of the sofa and drank cider spiked with vodka from a coffee cup. There was a jug of the stuff on the wood coffee table, a small puddle of cider spilled around the jug. The stone wall of the fireplace was warm and Dean had his feet up, feeling the heat go up his legs. Haskell's living room looked out a wall of windows. The overlooked forest land with a view of the water, and Dean could just see the roof of his own house, small and far off beyond the lake.

Haskell had his climbing gear out on the sofa, shoes, rope, and chalk bag, and Dean could smell the stink of the shoes. He took a drink and drew a breath from the cider. There were five plants near the window wall, three of them different kinds of trees

which Haskell trimmed and took care of like pets. Dean had given him one of the plants as a birthday present, though he didn't recognize which one. There was also a hunting bow sitting on the steps leading upstairs. Dean had never seen it before. It was one of Haskell's new toys.

Was Claire really out there? Dean said, studying the bow.

Haskell sat down on the sofa, pushing the climbing gear to the floor. Gypsy jumped up onto the sofa with him. Unless it was someone else, Haskell said. Where is she now?

Asleep, Dean said. I gave her three of those sleeping pills last night.

Jesus, she'll be asleep till Monday, Haskell said.

Let's hope, Dean said.

That's not very nice, Haskell said. You're not a very nice brother.

I'm the nicest brother on the fucking planet, Dean said.

I'm messing with you, Haskell said. She'll be fine, just a little sleepy all weekend.

I want to do something, Dean said. I want to shoot a deer or hike around. Let's do something.

Goddamn, you're antsy today. Did Claire make the coffee again?

I told you she's asleep. Let's use this bow. Is this new? What is it? Dean said, standing up, picking up the bow and aiming with it.

It's new, a compound, Haskell said. But there aren't any deer out there, Haskell said, rubbing Gypsy's head. It's freezing. It's too cold to go on a real hike. It's too cold

to shoot a bow like that, too, your finger's would break or you'd snap a tendon or something.

How do you work it?

I'm not real sure.

What do you mean you're not sure?

I don't know. I just felt like buying it.

You're such a bitch, Dean said. Okay, I need to get out. This is the first time in years I don't have deer meat.

Have some of mine.

I will, but let's go out. There's something out there, I can smell it.

Alright, Haskell said, standing up. You want to freeze, let's go out there and freeze. But there aren't going to be any deer.

*

They loaded the guns and a backpack with food and cider into the back of Haskell's truck. Gypsy rode in the bed of the truck.

They drove to a spot a few miles up the road where Haskell owned the land. His parents had been the only farmers in the area and Haskell not only owned the old farm, but also a good deal of forested land that was often confused for the national forest. The forest was hundreds of acres and hikers and hunters came up and hunted Haskell's land without knowing it. There had been hunting accidents and hikers got lost in the immensity of the forest.

Dean hadn't seen Haskell's parents since high school, but Haskell talked about them like a good Catholic kid would. In many ways, Haskell seemed like a kid to Dean.

He went to church every Sunday. He drove to his parent's house once a week, sometimes more, and had dinner with them. Haskell was a no-kidding Catholic. The women he dated, he did not sleep with. Dean thought this very amusing. The last woman Dean had been with, Sandy, months before Claire moved in, was a girl who Haskell had also dated. She was a blonde, a dental assistant, which meant teeth cleaner, and was rough in bed. Biting, wax, fruits. Dean wondered when dental tools would come into the picture, but he quit her when his mother got sick. To his mother, Sandy was a girlfriend. To Haskell, Dean talked of her as a toy, an experiment, even though he liked her company. When Dean told Haskell about how she was in bed, Haskell scoffed at him and said, And where is she now? He didn't tolerate things like that. Outwardly, Dean laughed, but he respected Haskell. Haskell drank, but he did not get drunk, and he made confession once a month. What the hell do you confess? Dean had said once. You never do anything. Haskell never talked about his first marriage. It had been annulled by the church and the few times Dean brought it up, Haskell wouldn't say anything except, It never happened. It wasn't real.

Haskell pulled the truck into a field next to the tree line. Gypsy immediately jumped from the bed of the truck and began running through the grass. Dean called after her.

Let her have fun, Haskell said.

They walked for an hour and didn't talk. The woods got darker the further they went, trees closing in. Even with the leaves gone, the sky was not visible. Dean walked, holding his shotgun with one hand, keeping the other hand in his pocket, then switching.

Do you ever talk to that Sandy girl anymore? Dean said.

Couple times, Haskell said. I saw her at Henry's in town a week or so ago.

I wasn't very nice to her.

She asked about you. I said you were doing well.

I probably would've avoided her, Dean said. I envy that about you. That you have nothing to hide or worry about.

Christ, Haskell said. I didn't even really like the girl.

Not just about the girl, Dean said. Just how you do things.

Haskell handed him the thermos of cider. It's still hot, he said.

*

There weren't any deer or any other animals in the woods. Dean and Haskell came to a spot where someone had built a blind into a tree. It was an old worn thing, the wood planks splitting and falling off the tree, the nails rusted and falling out. Bones of a small animal were scattered near the blind. Dean pushed the bones together with his foot, making a pile. There were shells and empty boxes of bullets and a few beer cans so old that only the aluminum showed. Dean and Haskell ate cold cheese sandwiches and Haskell tossed his crusts to Gypsy. Dean felt his feet getting cold, but he didn't say anything. Haskell handed him the thermos of spiked cider. The cider was still warm and he was happy to be out and he felt a warmth in his chest. He was getting drunk. He had an urge to sing something but he didn't know what.

They continued on, leaving the blind behind. They came to a creek and even though the lake was frozen, and it was below zero, the creek water ran clear and cold and seemed to be the only sound for miles.

Hot spring, Haskell said. They stopped to listen to it and the sound wasn't a gurgle, but something smoother, the sound of water over rock, echoing.

We should go back and use the blind, Dean said.

You would use a blind, Haskell said.

Not that it'd make a difference right now, Dean said.

Gypsy put her foot in the water, drank, and backed away shaking her head. They walked along the creek. Soon, Gypsy began limping, her front paws frozen. Dean called Gypsy over, pointed out the paws, rubbing them.

There's nothing out here anyway, Haskell said. Just like I said.

*

When Dean and Gypsy got back to his house, it was near evening. The sky was heavy and dark and it looked like it might snow any minute, though Dean knew it was too cold. The light was still on in the kitchen and Dean was glad to see it. He wanted to see Claire and decide what they were going to eat that night. He was very hungry. He wanted to say he was sorry about last night, though he didn't want to answer any questions about where he'd been and why they hadn't gone to Target or Wal-Mart. Or when they would be going to see mom. His nose was running and his hands were numb in his coat. It was difficult to bend his fingers. He tossed a stick for Gypsy and Gypsy got it twice, then stopped chasing it.

*

Inside he turned on the TV and called to Claire. Gypsy drank from her bowl in the washroom. Dean flipped off the TV and called to Claire again. He checked her room

and found the bed unmade. It was the only thing she did, make her bed. Her clothes for the day still lay out on her dresser.

Dean saw himself in her mirror. He saw the syringes under the bed and the tire gauge and picked them up and threw the syringes in the trashcan of the hall bathroom. He yelled for Claire again and then he checked the basement, where she said she liked to work out, but really she just liked snooping around in Dean's boxes full of junk. One time she had found some of his old Hustler magazines and she had teased him for weeks: Dean needs a girlfriend, she chanted. At the top of the basement stairs, he shouted for her, his voice coming back to him. Then he went back to the kitchen and saw the note, *Went to find you. Love, Claire.*

*

Outside again with Gypsy, there was just enough light to see, the trees and lake drained of color. He went around to the lake, and in the fading light, he saw a figure on the edge of the water, in the water. He saw what he thought was a face, pale and blue lipped, thick wild hair, unmoving. She's frozen in the water, he thought. She's freezing to death. She's fallen in. He ran and immediately stepped onto the ice, breaking through to the water, the ice sticking to his jeans and water rushing up through the hole in the surface of the ice. He waded out fast to the figure, ice cracking and water running, and then stopped. He looked back at Gypsy on the bank of the lake and he laughed. The face was a clump of tree stump and grass frozen into the lake. The face the smooth part of tree stump. Gypsy barked behind him on land, and only then did he notice the cold of the water on his legs, the tingling sensation. His legs were hard to move, but he got out and stripped out of his boots and pants. His whole body felt colder being out of the water.

You're gonna give me fucking frostbite, Claire, he said aloud, jogging back to the house, carrying the wet clothes.

She'll be back, he thought. She knows the way to get home. She probably left just before I got back and has only been gone for fifteen minutes. It's easy to get back. He thought he'd turn on all the lights just in case, so that she'd see that he was home, and he laughed at himself for not doing this in the first place.

Inside the house, he warmed his legs up by a heater. His legs were red from the cold water. Then he walked naked to the hall bathroom. Dean turned on the shower, waiting for the water to get warm. He put his hand in the water and wondered where she was right now, if she was out in the woods near Haskell's place, or someplace else.

When they were young, he felt he'd known her so well. He knew when she was going to cry if he pretended to be going past the creek, and he knew how happy she always got whenever Dean told her that he was going to shoot one of the hill people for her. He thought of how she'd walk along with him, pointing out the hill people behind trees, and he'd fire into a tree trunk or brush. Now things were different. He understood her moods, that she got mad if she didn't get what she wanted, if she didn't get to see their mother once a week or didn't get her haircut with Vicki. He didn't understand *her* though. She was the same as she'd always been and that was the problem. She hadn't grown with him, and now he only saw her as a memory of a life he no longer knew, no longer was a part of.

The water was warm and he got in.

*

He woke with his hair damp against his pillow, the bedroom dark, the wind going outside. He didn't know how long he slept. Half hour, an hour? He walked through the house and called out to Claire. She still wasn't home. He shouldn't have taken the shower, shouldn't have stopped looking for her. He should be out there with her right now, walking her home. Then he called Haskell, asked him to look for Claire, and after that, got his plaid coat and went out again with Gypsy.

He tried to think of how long he had slept as he jogged through the woods to Haskell's place. He thought she may have tried to walk there. He wondered how long she'd been gone. He called her name, Gypsy following behind instead of running ahead. He was hungry. All day he had only had a cheese sandwich and he thought about stopping to eat something at Haskell's, but he knew he shouldn't eat until he found Claire. He half-jogged to Haskell's, slipping in the dark on icy rocks and tree limbs. He yelled for Claire to stop playing around and then he just yelled her name. He was exhausted by the time he reached the rock wall leading onto Haskell's property. He leaned on his knees, catching his breath. There were dark spots in his vision. After a minute, he stood, and he felt the wall and tried to climb, his hands unable to find a good hold, and he fell hard twice, landing each time on his right side and arm, once smacking his head against the ground so that he heard the thud. When he stood, he was dizzy and there were tiny sparks in his vision that faded. He took the path around through the trees, the way the dog went. The forest was almost black, impenetrable, and he got stuck with tree branches, limbs cutting his face, his jacket snagging. He kept calling Claire's name and his voice sounded far away even to himself.

Haskell came out the front door with two flashlights.

I haven't seen her, he said, handing Dean a flashlight. There were binoculars around his neck. I've been looking since you called. What happened? Haskell tapped him on the forehead. Dean reached his hand up and felt wetness and then saw blood on his fingers in the beam of Haskell's flashlight. I fell a bit ago, Dean said, turning and heading back where he came. It's nothing.

Should we call your mom? Haskell said. Maybe Claire called her.

Her heart would explode, Dean said. No. I don't want to worry her.

Slow down, Haskell said, following him. Gypsy walked with Haskell.

*

Dean moved fast through the woods, shining the beam of the flashlight onto trees, over hills, and into clumps of brush and undergrowth. He was breathing hard, his lungs and legs burning from the hike earlier in the day. He called out for Claire, moving aimlessly through the woods, tripping over branches. He hiked for a long time, jogging, trying to avoid patches of ice and tree roots that could easily sprain or break an ankle. When he stopped to catch his breath at one point, he could see Haskell's flashlight far behind and up on a hill, the size of a match flame against the darkness.

I'm going this way, Dean yelled to him. You should check out toward the lake more.

He continued on, calling out for Claire, going deeper and deeper into the woods until he could no longer see the lights from the back of Haskell's house. He called out and called out and it soon began to sound to Dean as though she was calling back to him, and he kept turning to her voice, not able to pinpoint the direction it came from, going further into the forest.

He went on for two hours without noticing the time passing. He tried moving his toes in his boots but couldn't. At one point, he tripped over a downed barb wire fence, the wire catching on his thigh. He fell down a hill, sliding on his butt. When he came to a stop, he lay there and rested. He let his eyes close and open. Through the trees, stars shone in the sky. A splash of the milky way was overhead and there was Orion's belt. He breathed hard and he felt sweat on his arms and it was freezing. He stood and inspected his leg. The barbs had ripped his jeans above the knee and tore into the skin of the thigh. Blood soaked his jeans.

He kept going. Every place he turned there was dark and woods, the same thing every way he looked, the beam of the flashlight lighting up grey ice-coated trees. The wind picked up. The jeans stuck to his leg, blood soaking above the knee, and he was dizzy and cold and again he stopped and leaned on his knees and the dark spots in his vision bloomed and faded as he looked at his hands. He breathed deep but it was hard to get a good breath and he kept breathing deeply and leaning on his knees like he had just run five miles. In the dark, his hands looked blue. Fucking gloves, he said aloud, his voice slurred. Then he heard the sound of crying and turned and shined the flashlight on Gypsy. She stood near him, shivering on the stump of a tree and whimpering. Dean looked around and saw that Haskell was nowhere in sight and the few houses in the area were gone. He shoved his hands into his pockets for a moment. His hands burned when he forced them into the jeans. He took them out, switching the flashlight from hand to hand. He danced up and down. He told himself if he kept going, he'd find her, the next opening in the trees would reveal her, would show her huddled and crying like they way she used to when he left her at the creek, and then, when he found her, she'd get so happy

to see him, and hug him around the neck hard, pulling herself into him. He snapped for Gypsy. His fingers burned. He snapped again and when he looked at the tree stump some twenty feet behind him, the dog was no longer there. He went over to the stump and fanned the flashlight around. A wind went through the trees. His arms tingled from the forearm to his fingers. He pulled his coat down over his hands and again fanned the area with the light. He called to the dog then to Haskell and was answered with the wind, the trees creaking. He jogged, then started running, broke into a sprint, trying to get a bearing on where he was. He didn't know which way to run. He walked up a hill, the same one he thought he'd fallen down, and tried to find the barb wire he had tripped on, but he could not find it, and he still could not get a deep breath and he breathed and breathed, huffing now, his breath like smoke in front of his face. The direction felt right and he kept going and after what seemed like a lot of walking decided that it was the wrong hill and he was going the wrong way and he was afraid that he was turned around and of what would happen if he was turned around. He turned and ran again, the flashlight beam darting from one tree to the next. If I can find the creek we used to go to, he thought. His flashlight beam hit only solid ground and branches and stones. A numbness took over the tingling in his hands and it was near impossible to move them. Then he remembered that there was no creek, that the creek was at his mother's old house. The forest seemed impenetrable and he tried to think of how he'd gotten into this mess and what was going to happen now but he couldn't think and he told himself to keep moving to stay warm. He saw Claire's dark shape and pale face beside trees, around every next piece of brush, behind every downed tree trunk. He went deeper into the woods. His faced burned with cold.

MARATHON, OHIO

When I'm running, they see me all small coming down the road, trees swaying overhead, clouds in the sky or clear sun, and they think they have the upperhand, quiet and still, watching. They maybe say something to their neighbor over the fence, the words almost lost in the breeze: *There he goes again.* Sometimes they'll shout things to me. A greying woman from her spot on the porch: *What're you running from?* Sometimes they'll just nod at me and go back to their lawnmower or baseball game. Children stand at the edge of lawns waiting to be noticed; some ask if I want sprayed with the sprinkler. High school kids turn their backs.

What they don't see is what I see. Before they even know I'm coming, I've got them framed. The Mallory's arguing while planting flowers, both down on their knees, Jim getting louder then going quiet when he sees me shimmer up through the afternoon heat. Mrs. Wilkinson coughing into her handkerchief. She stares far off down the street, down toward the post office and grocery store. She's not seeing any of that, though. She's with Tom, her husband, wherever he is, beyond the here and now. I've seen the Boston's do a yard sale large enough to take up a small space in the mall. Old junk on the lawn; their daughter's prom dress from the year before was out there for two days before it sold. They dropped its price about a dozen times and shortly afterward sold one of their cars.

And for once, I see this small town clearly. I see how cut-off everyone is, how small, each just a leaf on a tree. And I see my own little life clearly, too, in relation to all these other ones.

The pavement, the heat, wind against my body or not; the cyclical motion of the run, the going and coming, legs pumping and arms working, not carried tight, not loose, but smooth: this clears away confusion easy like blowing dust from a mirror.

The problem is, when I get home and the run wears off, I'm dumb again.

*

My sister started it. I've been in town six months and already I'm tangling up with Evie again, my first ex-wife. When I was first with Evie, she was a nurse, like she is now. We were married two years and by the end of those two years, she was a whisper of woman, a bag of bones beneath pale skin. She wasn't always that way. For whatever reason, my sister, Carrie, wants me back with her, so she's arranging things, setting us up, pushing us together.

When the divorce happened, when everything finally opened up, I wondered how much people knew about us. I know they'd seen a fight at the Johnston's cookout, heard word *pornography* loud on Evie's lips; they'd seen the times I'd locked her out the house, how she'd run around to the back door only in time to see me locking it, how she'd gone down to the Boston's where Jim Boston always took her in; they'd seen a black eye I'd caught from her; they'd seen how much weight I'd put on and how much Evie had lost, as though I was taking from her, filling myself up and tossing away the picked over bone. I may have been doing this, too. How else could I explain the weight gain?

One night, the three of us eat dinner at my sister's house, our parents' old house. It's a one story place, like all the houses in town, with dark brown wood siding. The kitchen opens onto the family room, and Carrie's re-done the house in deep fall colors. Evie and I are in the kitchen, watching Carrie cook. A cat sits on a barstool, licking the

island countertop. A pot of boiled potatoes and a pot of some rice and chicken mixture steam. This is the first night I've told them about the marathon.

That explains the weight loss, Carrie says, stirring the rice pot and then patting my stomach. You look good.

I'm sore, I say. It's a good kind of pain. You should come out with me sometime. You'd feel better.

You look better, Evie says, leaning on the counter.

How much time will this cut into your work schedule? Carrie says.

It won't take any time away from work, I say. I don't have a job.

Carrie nods, then says, Do you guys want garlic mashed or regular mashed?

What do you want? I say.

Regular mashed.

Fine.

Carrie pours milk into the pot of potatoes and then adds a couple hunks of butter. She takes a masher and smashes the potatoes, the whole stove top rattling.

Easy, I say.

She mashes on, then says, If you and Evie do get back together, will you have time to devote to her, as a friend?

I don't say anything to this.

Jesus, Evie says, tossing at dishtowel at Carrie. Shut up.

Evie's been through therapy in the years we've been apart. A thing I always suggested to her in our fights. A thing she always suggested back to me. She's bolder now.

When she gets down, Carrie goes on. Will you be there for her?

Come on, I say.

No, Carrie says, smacking the masher on the rim of pot, potato chunks flinging up. No come on.

It might seem like we're ganging up on you, Evie says. But it's just her.

Again, I think of her therapy. I say to her, I didn't say anyone was ganging up on me. I just want to know why I'm being interrogated.

These are the exact questions that should've been asked before, Carrie says. That's all.

Now I get it, I say. You're her therapist.

The women exchange looks. I go quiet, watching the food steam and the air vent above the stove suck up the steam.

*

It began like this.

I had lost an account at work, a big client we do advertising for. My soon-to-be second ex-wife, Judith, also my boss, thought I needed to re-focus – she threatened to take away my expense account privileges. I threatened to take away the fake tits I had bought her. She then took away the expense account privileges. This of course did make me work harder, but not at work. I started running, working out, getting back in shape. A week or so later, she came by my cubicle and told me I needed to buckle down and get zoned in. Believe in what I was doing again. She stood at the opening of my cubicle, wearing a black pant suit, telling me these things. I was watching highlights from the

most recent Boston Marathon on my computer; I talked to her with my back turned. She'd heard about my new interest in marathons.

You don't need to be going for a twenty-four mile jog.

Twenty-six, I said, clicking on marathon links. I thought you were always trying to get me back in shape.

I don't really care what the hell you look like anymore as long as you get me a deal with Altech.

So this wouldn't be a good time to discuss our relationship? I said.

The only relationship we have is the one that takes place in this building, she said. Unless you'd rather not have that one either.

I debated the run for weeks, confused about doing it or not. The thing is, you get something in your head, and it either goes away or it doesn't. I don't know what put the thing in my head, but there it was one day, and it wouldn't leave. I thought about running a marathon during meetings, watching all my officemates, wondering if they dreamed of sitting in glass and steel buildings talking about the design colors of a duck on an ice cream ad. I read a book about how to train instead of doing work. I traded in porn websites for Runner's World and personal blogs, reading testimonials about people who collapsed across the finish line, their legs cramping, vomiting nothing but water, dirt and sweat ringed around their eyes and on their forehead, but clean. Pure. For the first time. I wanted that. I quit my job and moved out of the city, back to where I'd come from, I wanted it so bad.

*

I push my body to breaking when I'm running. It takes the strength of the mind to do it and when everything comes together and I'm not running or on a run but just doing it, that's when I hover an inch above things. That's when I get a new perspective. The townspeople here square off against one another in the same way town itself does. Rich side poor side. I run through the middle of it. On my runs, I try to see the town without people, as a thing, as a series of buildings. Main street is brickpaved and has all the buildings on it except for the two schools and churches: there's the IGA grocery store, Bartlett's theatre, an ice cream parlor, antique shops, a used bookstore, two music joints, a hardware store, a stationary store, a video rental place in an old brick building, and several of the towns restaurants, the best one called *Joe's*, this mom and pop Italian place in a converted bank building. People walk Main street, wave at me, and I feel far from them, like they're cut-out people, made of cardboard, unreal. I see almost everyone that lives in the town on Main; they stand on the curb and wave at me, ask me where I'm running to today. They come out of the ice cream parlor with cones and don't pay me any attention, or they carry a large pizza home, the warm pizza smell in the air.

The town is like a small New England town. There are two schools. The public one, Elmsbury, and the first one, the private St. Michaels. St. Michaels is surrounded by large oaks and maples that shade the school and darken the streets. On my runs, I catch a coolness beneath the trees and feel comforted by their quiet bigness. Attached to St. Michael's is one of two town churches. It has stained glass windows and is made of stone and when the sun's right on certain evenings, the steeple seems to rise up through the trees above the town. There have been no priest scandals, but people hold out for the young Father Hynes, I think, a kid I grew up with and we all teased for being gay. The

other church is a plain brick building, a cross plastered above the two metal front doors. It advertises God in lights, a billboard sign on the front lawn. I have to run by it, too, if I want to make it out of town. Evie belongs to that one.

On some evenings that I jog, passing City Hall, I've seen public debates on tourism taking place. A small group of people sit on plastic and iron chairs on the lawn; the old people fall asleep and children squirt their parents with guns. From what words I've caught, the core of the debate isn't really tourism, but how much the past will be present in the future, the awake adults pointing to the kids when they make an argument. They argue seriously, as if these things really matter. But I try not to blame them. It's all they know. The debate runs through the whole town. Some think, like the Mallory's, that the town should be advertised, that the state park nearby, the two historic theatre's, the small liberal arts college and the Clausen's Winery should be bringing in more outsiders, and as a result of more profit and people, change. Others like Mrs. Wilkinson sneer and say that the Clausen's Winery isn't really very good and the liberal arts college is actually a community college. She wants her quiet.

I pass through all this on my way out and run toward the new highway. For the people that live here in Ohio, I suspect the past is always close behind, like it is for me. After Evie, I left Ohio for good, like my parents did. But now I'm back, looking to be alone and work on myself. And though Evie's still here, she's not the Evie I knew. She's thin still, but no longer a pushover. She has direction now and knows what she wants in her life: a house and family and a God, whatever building He's in, and two dogs, maybe beagles. The rest of the town could learn something from her, I think. She doesn't

talk about who we were back then, she only wants to know where we might be going now. *Now* is her mantra, her prayer. She's wised up.

When I come to the new highway, I stop my run – my head and legs and lungs burn. My pulse pounds down through my legs into my feet. Cramping begins and I stretch. Heat rises off the asphalt. On one side of the road a skeleton of a barn rattles in the wind. On the other side, about a quarter mile up, is a Seven-Eleven and further up from that the beginnings of a strip mall. I look back toward the barn and climb down the ditch. I look up and down the road and then take a leak, watching the barn. Even from my spot in the weedy grass, I can see cobwebs dangling down through the rafters. Sunlight filters into the barn. Insects buzz in the air. I shake off and step closer to the barn. The doors on the back and front of the thing are gone and I can see out the back to the field beyond. Surrounding the barn are a few cows, the smell of livestock heavy in the air. Who owns them, who owns the property and the barn, I don't know; the last stand of some local farmer maybe. I turn off my watch and go in. Behind me on the road, a truck pulls up alongside the ditch I was just peeing in. I turn and see Jim Boston hanging out of his truck. Immediately, I wish I was still running.

What're you doing? he yells to me, and I pretend like I can't hear. He turns off his engine. What're you up to in the barn? he says.

Just checking it out, I say.

He doesn't say anything for a minute. Are you back for good? he says. I mean, who are you staying with?

I'm not at Evie's, I say to him. I've got an apartment in the Pines.

I wasn't asking about Evie, he says.

I step out from the barn, watch him in his truck.

She's doing good now, he says. I wouldn't want to see that get messed up is all.

Thanks for the concern, I say, stepping back into the barn, not feeling like explaining anything about what Evie and I are or aren't. I want to be alone; I want him to leave. A bug flies around my head and I swat it away. Heat's trapped inside the barn and I sweat hard and wipe my forehead with my shirt. There's a rusted scythe hanging from a wall, next to it a hoe and a huge hammer, the wooden handle cracked in half. Boston starts up his truck behind me. The diesel growls.

When's the marathon? he says.

Another month or so, I say. How'd you know about it?

Come on, Boston says. Everybody knows about it. Everybody sees you running everyday. Evie talks to people at work, they talk to friends. You know how it goes.

I do, I say.

Then you know I've heard about you two, he says.

I walk further into the barn, give him a wave, and turn my back. His diesel roars down the road and I listen to it get fainter until the only sound I hear is the wind shaking the barn.

*

The 82nd annual Powell Fest takes place during a weekend in mid-summer. The town re-blooms for it. Potted flowers hang from lampposts and line the main drag, pink and white petals covering the brickpaved street. Two local painters have done over the public schools playground wall, which for a year portrayed the 9/11 towers – this year, the muralists paint abstractly, possibly a man and woman in veiled sexual positions, or

alternately, clothed biped cows urinating. Live music hums through the streets and people mill around, staring at the mural or pointing at floral arrangements. For a weekend, everyone comes together.

I don't want to go to the fest, but Evie insists. We walk down Main Street and our shadows stretch away in front of us on the cobblestone. I've taken four Advil for strain in my back. Evie's wearing jeans and a flower-embroidered blouse. Her hair is pulled back.

Jill Mallory walks by us on the sidewalk and asks me how far I ran today. I stop walking and tell her thirteen miles. She says she sees me running everyday and smiles, walks away. I turn up the street again to catch up with Evie.

I want to do the run, she says, when I'm up with her. I want to do the marathon.

We come to a tent near Bartlett's Theatre. The Clausen's Winery has samples set out on a table underneath the tent. Two barrels of wine are tapped – a tradition. People come and buy a cup for seven dollars and get as many refills as they'd like within reason.

You can't just go out and jog twenty-six miles, I say. It takes training.

I could train with you.

You've got to have a certain mentality, I say.

The one you have.

It's about more than running.

In front of us, Jim Boston is asking for more wine from Carrie, who's helping with the Clausen's tent. Boston's wearing a pair of jeans and white shirt with paint stains on it, along with a plain blue ball cap. Boston and I used to be pals, but it ended when he got in the middle of a fight Evie and I had. He and his wife started taking Evie out,

having her over, and he gave me nasty looks whenever I saw him in town. Now he looks like he wants another drink bad and Carrie won't let him have anymore.

There's no limit, Boston says to Carrie.

You've got to have a schedule, I say to Evie, trying to ignore Boston. Your job, you work all these different hours. You've got to be able to run everyday on a schedule.

I've got a pretty set schedule, she says.

The thing is, I didn't know you were into cardio stuff?

I can run a race.

Boston is holding up the line now and I step in front of Evie to hear him better. It says free refills on your sign, he says. So I want one.

You haven't even moved away, Carrie says from behind the wine table, looking to me for help. You're supposed to walk around and look at things.

Or I can do it my way, he says.

He's had four glasses, Carrie says to me. He's just standing here and waiting.

I shrug and say, Exactly why I wanted to avoid this thing.

Evie looks at me. Carrie pulls Boston to the side of the barrel, speaks quiet to him. Evie hands seven dollars over to a girl I've never seen before and gets a paper cup filled with red wine.

I understand, Boston says loud. Now one more cup.

Give him another cup, Evie says to Carrie.

Carrie shakes her head and hands Boston another cup.

You gave in, I say to Carrie, handing her a ten dollar bill.

She takes the bill, still eyeing Boston. He takes a long swig, leaving no more than a sip, and looks at me. Marathon man, he says. Everybody knows the marathon man. How're you doing? And the skinny nurse, he says to Evie and grabs her ass. You still with this old marathon man?

Evie pushes him away and I step between the two of them. Carrie yells something. I push Boston away. He stumbles backward and then forward and before I can put my hands out to stop him he whirls around with a haymaker and catches me square on the nose. Blood pours down my shirt.

*

There are hidden parts every place has. You can't see them from the highway, you have to go deeper, and even then you can only watch. No one will let you in.

After I reach the highway on my evening runs, I come back by another route, circling to the outside of town, down Leonard Street. It's the area the rest town has forgotten, avoids. People drive through it sometimes and keep their eyes on the road and look away when possible. A pool I went to years ago crumbles. Around the pool, there's a fence and weeds grow up the side of it. In places, the fence is torn down. There's graffiti on the pool, but even it's fading, chipped away like the blue painted concrete. Across from the pool, abandoned houses sink into the dirt. I've seen a man come out of one of those houses on runs, tip his ballcap at me, but most of the time, there's only me until I come to Eleventh Street.

On the corner of Leonard and Eleventh, a corner store with bars on the windows is a meeting place. Girls walk the streets, one on a side. Short shorts and tube tops and swinging purses. They go home with the men off work, fumbling a few words of

greeting or laughing loud. Jim Boston comes to this side of town and so does Casey Miller from the local paper and Bobby Kutts from the Italian restaurant. They get the girls first. And the men who don't pick up anybody don't know what to do. When I pass, they crack jokes in the parking lot about how the next Olympics is another two years away, have a beer instead. No one laughs except the joker. And when I'm running, it's easy to see, so simple, that people here have fallen out of rhythm. It's seems that most everyone has, myself too, some are just better at covering it up than others.

*

Evie doesn't take me to the emergency room for my nose. She takes me to her house, the same one we had lived in. Things have grown up: the pear tree in the backyard rises above the house; forsythia rings the front walkway; and the house itself has changed from an off-white to a deep blue. She takes me in.

I sit at the kitchen table, a dim lamp on in the corner of the family room. What the fuck happened with Boston? I say, tilting my head back and holding my nose. He's still living in the past.

Don't do that, she says. You'll get a blood clot and die.

I try to look at her face to see if she's joking but she's gone down the hallway to the bathroom. A light comes on in the hallway. The house is quiet and dark. A fan blows somewhere and paper crinkles. Outside crickets drone. I realize that I don't recognize the inside of the place. I have no memory of it. Then the light coming from the hallway goes out and Evie's standing in shadow at the edge of the hall, holding cotton and surgical tape and a bottle of something. The dim yellow light from the family room lamp touches the skin of her arm, shows the curve of her body against the dark hallway.

You've always liked him, I say.

Boston? she says. Yeah, he's likeable.

He's a real charmer, I say. That guy's got some real character.

Shut up, she says. He and Bonnie were nice to me when we were splitting up. They took care of me.

I watch her say this, how calm her eyes look. I had always thought of Boston as a nuisance, someone in the way of us back then. Evie puts some liquid on a cottonball and then she looks at my face, my nose. It doesn't really hurt, I say.

She comes toward me and kneels between my legs. It will, she says, resting her elbows on my thighs.

She reaches up, touches the bridge of my nose and puts the bottle in my hand. Read this, she says. I look down at the bottle, try to focus on the label, and she snaps my nose back with a crack. Blood and mucous run out again.

What was that? I say, a pain sharpening in the center of my face.

The band-aid trick, she says. If I told you I was going re-set your nose, it never would've gotten done. You'd still be asking how bad it was going to hurt and if you should wait until some Tylenol kicked in. Now sit up straight.

She begins sticking gauze up my nose. Slow down, I say.

You know, she says, pushing harder. I know I can do a marathon.

*

Everything halts. Training stops. Days bleed into one another until they're the same one over and over. The town itself lies like a dead thing in the august heat. I reassess things: with my nose bandaged, I'm stared at in town and I wonder if I made the

right decision in coming back. Simple things become large in my head. Getting groceries. Buying fertilizer. Looking for a job. It's as though a ghost from the town's past showed up and got confused, wasn't sure if this was the right place to be haunting. People talk and maybe they talk about why I've come back. Maybe they think I have money and am in early retirement. Maybe they believe I've learned something about my past and heritage, the true country. Maybe they think I've come to make good with Evie or my sister. Maybe they think I just want to run. I realize, also, that this all could be in my head, but that doesn't stop me from thinking it.

*

Evie begins running. She makes a point of going by my place. She gets up early and runs with her head up and hair in a ponytail. I'm almost ready for the bandages to come off my nose again and to start running. I don't know if it's in me anymore though.

On a Tuesday, Jim Boston rides by my place. He's on an old bicycle, one with a bell, and I see him slowing. I'm sitting on my porch and try to go inside before he says something, but there's no chance. He calls my name before I even touch the doorknob, and I turn around, meet him on the porch. He's sober, but he's got a mid-summer cough and a red blotch on his neck in the shape of rabbit ears. He tells me that his wife went away for a while, that she took the only car they have and went to her parents' place about two hours away. He scratches the rabbit-ear blotch.

She'll be back, he says, sitting on my porch rail. It's nothing to worry about.

I agree, I say.

It's probably just that the truck brokedown wherever she is. He pulls out his checkbook.

That's probably it.

I think so, he says, looking down the street. I just wanted to square up with you, he says, looking at the ground for a second then back down the street.

It didn't cost me anything, I say. Evie fixed me up.

He holds the checkbook with pen ready. Then he shoves both into his front jean pocket.

You and Evie getting back together? Boston says.

No, I say. Not that it should matter to you.

He looks down the street, then at me. If you need anything at the shop, let me know, he says, and walks off toward his bike. I watch him peddle up the hill into town. And I follow him, walking, until he's disappeared over the hill. When I make it into town, I'm sweating. I go to the Urgent Care and find Evie with a patient. I wait in the hallway until she comes out, fluorescent lights above humming.

Can I take this off? I say, when she comes out into the hallway.

She pulls the bandage up, looks under it. It's a little early, she says. But yeah.

She sits me in an empty white room, on a bed with a paper strip on it, and pulls the bandage off and begins taking the gauze out of my nose. My face decompresses and the gauze grows in size in her hand. The gauze is blotched red.

I've seen you running, I say. Real nice how you plan the route right by my house.

It's a good place to run.

You don't even know what a good place to run is. You don't know what that means.

She grabs my nose, squeezes. I fall back on the bed and pain stings my eyes and they water up. She pushes with her thumb on the bridge of my nose and the white room blurs. I wait for a crack. She lets go. I'm getting up at four tomorrow, she says, walking out of the room. My heart's going and I don't get up. Everything's blurred and I taste blood and the pain makes everything clear in my head, my selfishness and stupidity.

I run home and only the smallest amount of blood falls.

*

We run through town, past the schools and the churches, toward the new highway and the old barn, then circle around on Leonard, diving through the other part of town. We make it up to seventeen miles, but not the recommended twenty-one – my legs feel off, sluggish, and my mind won't fall into the running.

On one evening workout, going down Leonard, we stop. Up from the barred corner store, there are two gas stations, one closed down and the other with only two working pumps. Evie points out Mrs. Wilkinson's car in the lot of the open store, but I don't see Mrs. Wilkinson. Evie jogs up to the car.

We can't stop, I say. This'll ruin our pacing.

It's her car, Evie says.

It is a little Corolla, but Mrs. Wilkinson isn't around. Evie goes in the store.

We've got another four miles, I yell. Shit, I say. I follow, turning off my watch. Inside the store, a man with glasses looks at me. Evie's standing before him.

Mrs. Wilkinson? Evie says.

He nods toward the back and we go out. I don't know what she's doing, he calls after us. Mrs. Wilkinson's behind the store, crouched down, making kissy noises, trying

to get a small Terrier-like dog to come to her. The dog's back against a fence with his tail between his legs.

Mrs. Wilkinson, I say.

She looks up at me. Who are you?

I'm your neighbor, I say. I live in 112.

I'm getting Sammy, she says. He ran off again.

Her husband's dog, Sammy, died years ago, before her husband himself died. That dog just looks like Tom's dog, Evie says to her. It's a different one.

No, she says. This is Sammy. Who are you? she says to Evie, backing away from her, holding a hand palm out.

It's okay, Evie says, touching her wrist, bringing her along through the store. The man with glasses nods at us.

Don't forget Sammy, Mrs. Wilkinson says.

I go back and pick up the dog. The run goes out of me, out of both of us. We drive Mrs. Wilkinson's Corolla with her and the dog back to her house.

I'm sorry I interrupted your exercise, Mrs. Wilkinson says.

We tell her it's okay and when we get her safely inside her house with the dog, we see two other Terrier-looking dogs trot to Mrs. Wilkinson, two other Sammy's exactly like the Sammy she's just found.

*

The race is on us fast. The night before, Carrie drives us to the city and we stay at a hotel. We eat pasta and continue hydrating like we've been doing for weeks. In a too soft bed, I don't sleep.

The race day is hot even though it's the end of the summer, and when the run begins, I find out that running in a city is a different thing than a town, and everything feels off, my striding, breathing, the buildings that close in. I cramp in my left lat around the sixteenth mile, but keep going, rubbing it out. Then I cramp in my left lung and double my in-breaths to make it go away, stretching my left arm above my head to loosen up. It doesn't work.

Somewhere around the twenty-second mile, my body and mind give out. Before I fall, I notice there's no one around. It's a section of the run where there aren't any spectators, just old buildings and pavement. I squint ahead of me to see if there's another runner close; I look for Evie. I don't know if she's in front of me or behind. I turn to look behind me, but I never make it all the way around. I hit the pavement like a bag of sand, scattered, and everything goes black.

*

After a night, the hospital lets me go and Carrie drives us home. I sit in the backseat, not saying anything on the way home. It's night and I watch the city thin out, the buildings fall away, gas stations dot the outskirts of the city, and then farmland opens everything up. A moon rises over the fields. In the back seat, in the dark, I think about how it was Evie who found me on the pavement, passed out. She found a race official, who called an ambulance and Carrie; Evie and Carrie rode with me to the hospital. Despite this, I want to blame Evie for the run. In my mind, I blame her. I blame Boston. I blame Mrs. Wilkinson and her dog.

When we get home, there's a small gathering in front of Bartlett's theatre, the same tent in place as during the summer festival, similar Clausen's wine barrels out. A small handmade banner hangs in the tent. It's a marathon party, a little celebration.

Oh shit, I say from the back seat.

Evie sits in the passenger seat, quiet.

Don't be an asshole, Carrie says, and she parallel parks on Main Street.

We're worn out, and I'm mad, mad at Evie, mad at the run and that it got screwed up, but seeing the town there for us, I try to wake up. Carrie helps me out of the car even though I don't need it and we talk to people. Evie shows pictures off. She swears she can pick us out of the huge crowd at the beginning of the race.

Look, she says. There we are.

Maybe, people say, gathering around a Clausen's wine barrel.

No, no, she says. Look closer. We're right there. The two of us. That's us. Right there.

That could be, they say, but they want more about the actual run. People ask us questions; what does it feel like when you finish? was passing out during a marathon different from regular passing out? does it hurt? I have no real answers. I'm still out of it but being around people makes the anger I feel turn into some sort of calm, some acceptance; when people speak, they seem to do it together. Jim Boston's there. He sits with me while everyone else talks. He doesn't say much, just shakes my hand and asks if I want any wine. I tell him no and he gets me a glass of water and we sit while everyone mills around, talking and laughing. I sleep hard for a week afterward.

*

Evie and I don't move into the same house and we don't say the words marriage or sex or love. In a town like this, there's no way to miss a person and no reason to be too close. Things move as always, summer moves into fall and a coolness settles deep into everyone's hearts. After a couple weeks of rest, I begin training again and pick up a job at a copy store. Mrs. Boston returns from wherever she was; she brings boxes of grapefruit for select neighbors. Mrs. Wilkinson's dementia moves fast and she moves into the old folks' home and they don't let her keep all the Sammy's. I don't know where they sent them. Her house goes up for sale. Evie and I visit her some days in a hotel-looking room with a television, dresser and a bed. Mrs. Wilkinson's sits in a recliner and talks with us. She's thinned, her skin hanging around her face so that the outline of her skull is apparent. Her mind's not gone yet, but she does call me Tom sometimes. Evie tells me to let her. The old woman says, *Tom?* like she's asking if he's really there, and I sit on the bed and say back, *Yes, yes. What do you want?* She asks about our running. She can't get it through her head that Evie runs, too.

Are you running today? she asks me.

We both run everyday, Evie says, sitting against the dresser.

Why in the world?

Evie doesn't say anything and Mrs. Wilkinson looks at me.

I don't know, I say. We can't help it.

Sometimes Mrs. Wilkinson won't say anything, and we'll just sit there, me on the bed, Evie on the dresser, and we'll wait for her to fall asleep. When she does and we step out into the town, it's evening. Streetlamps glow, lights come on in houses, and a yellow moon rises behind Bartlett's theater. The marquee lights shine. A cool fall wind stirs up

leaves on the sidewalk and a stray cat hides under cars parallel parked on the street. Bells from St. Michael's ring through town and classical music hums from the used bookstore. A group of kids in soccer uniforms crosses the street and run home. Evie and I walk along the brickpaved street with the other townspeople, who move from shadow to streetlamp through the main part of town, getting groceries, walking dogs, going to dinner.

RED RIVER GORGE

The letter from my father arrived in June. In it, he described electronic bugs hidden in light fixtures, a dark car trailing him on simple errands, getting groceries, dropping off the mail. There were silent phone calls and constant hang ups. There was Danny Charles, a neighbor and a friend from my father's Marine Corps days, who helped with bills; my father accused him of stealing money and blank checks. There was the cable man who set up video surveillance in the cable box and stole tools from the garage; the phone company who shut down his line. My father dismantled the cable box and let the phones be.

When the letter came, I had not spoken to him in a long time, though I had thought about him and wanted to call or write. When I was growing up, he had been mean. He never hit my mother, he just threw her out of the house. He belittled her in front of people, called her stupid for forgetting to feed the dogs or not catching a spot on his shirt. He told her to wear more make-up, that she was aging poorly. When I was thirteen, my mother died. We never talked about it. A few years later I would tell him that I was glad she had died because she had escaped him. He broke my nose for that. Above all, he was full of littleness, smallness, and took pride in not needing anyone.

After reading the letter, I thought I could help him – I was thirty-five. He was in his seventies. I imagined him grown into an old man, thin grey hair, fattened red face and pot belly, halting walk and froze-up gestures. His eyes whitened by cataracts. He lived alone in a house that looked out on a city that I hated, and that he watched over with fuzzed vision and growing paranoia: the paper plant nearby was owned by a Jewish family, he had always complained, and the large beer company was worked by blacks.

White smoke, I remember, swelled up from smokestacks of both factories and the stink of both mixed in his house. The city aged with him. Sidewalks crumbled, streets sunk, potholes formed, and old broken buildings were always coming down, being demolished. I thought of taking him out of the city, away from the places where I grew up and we fought in. I thought this would help both of us and give me a chance to show him the mistakes he had made.

On a Monday, I packed a bag and drove to his house. I started before sun up and went up through the mountains, the orange rock cut clean through, and then came down to the lower foothills, following the Ohio River. Everything was wet and green and the road reflected headlights. To either side of the highway was the immensity of the forest land, the trees so thick that it seemed you could walk on top of the leaves, up above everything. In the distance, a storm flickered.

I got to my father's house in the late afternoon. It was raining. The white siding of the house was dirty grey and the neighborhood looked smaller than I remembered. Weeds grew in the yard and the chain link fence around the front of the house was torn down on the left side. Down the street, a group of kids stood by the rundown Y building and chipped away at the brick with rocks, watching me. I parked my truck on the street, under a maple tree. The rain came harder and pulled leaves onto my windshield. In the neighbor's house, from a second floor window, a man watched me. When I looked up, the curtain fell back in place and the man's shadow moved away.

I knocked on the front door. After a minute, my father opened up wearing a flannel shirt and jeans. It was dark inside, musty and warm.

What do you want? he said, looking past me onto the street.

You sent me a letter, I said. I came for you.

He looked at my park ranger jacket, then up at my cap. I don't know who sent you, he said. I haven't been talking about anything.

I didn't know what to say to this. The kids down the street were still watching me, standing under a tree for cover from the rain. He tried to close the door. I don't know why you're watching me, he said, pushing the door against my hand. I haven't done anything.

I stuck my foot in the frame. Hold it, I said. Dad. It's me. Look at me, Dad. It's me. I took off my hat.

His eyes, whitened like I had expected, squinted and looked hard at me. Then he said, I didn't recognize you. He didn't say anything for a moment, just stayed standing in the doorway. You got the letter? he said.

Yes. Can I come in?

*

I'm a ranger in one of the biggest parks in Kentucky. I live inside the park, in a cabin on the west of the acreage, an isolated place near a creek, which feeds the Red River. Inside the cabin, there's a kitchen at the back, two beds on either end of the main room, and a bathroom off to the left side. There's room between the beds for small eating table and two chairs. I like the emptiness of the area and I sometimes sit on the wood floor and read. There is one window over the sink and one above my bed. In the morning in the summer, I wake before sun up, the sounds of the creek coming through my open windows, wind through the leaves. In the winter, the creek freezes and I close up,

shoving a towel in the crack in the doorway and around the edges of the windows to keep out the cold; a wood-burning stove heats the whole place.

A woman named Melissa stops by with organic fruits and vegetables, and we cook vegetarian dinners, stews and casseroles. We have a date once a month. She works in a store in town, where I get groceries. I rent her a cabin for half-price. She's had two husbands and an abortion years ago.

We're getting acquainted. I've told her my own personal things over our dinners. I explained why I came to live here, why I've stayed for so many years. There's a meanness in people, a selfishness, that doesn't come out here, I said. People have forgotten that they're a part of the natural order. They've forgotten themselves. It's easy to see here.

Yeah, she said. I guess so. That's really judgmental though, isn't it?

Not if it's true, I said.

This last month we sat on the floor of my cabin, eating a Chinese vegetable stew she had made and she talked to me about our relationship. A roll of paper towels between us, already some stew spilled on the wood floor.

I don't want to have sex with you, she said.

That's too bad, I said.

I don't even want to date you, she said. Dating you. Or us dating or getting married, would be a disaster. Do you understand what I mean?

I told her I did.

It's like we're not quite opposites, she said, her index fingers circling each other. It's more like we're planets, or I'm a planet and you're a moon and we can never really come together.

I didn't say anything to this. Then I nodded and smiled. Planets, I said.

That's not cool, she said. You're making fun of me and I'm trying to talk here.

Outside a coyote howled. I sat listening for a moment, eating the stew from the wooden bowl. I watched her, how she brushed her hair away from her face, leaned in to eat from her bowl, and I adopted these same movements, as though I had none of my own. She continued to talk, and I nodded, leaning in, listening to her, and it seemed that I was a mirror of her. She put her bowl down.

This is the place we're good at, she said, her hands forming around an invisible jar, as though she had taken hold of our entire relationship. Right here, doing what we do. Her hands fell and she looked at me.

I agree, I said.

She picked up her bowl of stew from the wood floor. Steam rose from it. What do you want me to bring next month? she said.

You could come next weekend, I said. There's a little party Mrs. Sadler's throwing. We could go together.

Weren't you listening, she said. I said I like this arrangement. This once a month thing is working out good for me. Don't you think so?

It's fine, I said. But what about when you come help out in the park office?

That's different. That's not us. That's me and other people. I want to keep us the way we are, she said, and looked up. She put her hair in a ponytail. Oh, did I tell you about what Bill did this week? she said.

Bill, her manager, came up often. I don't think so, I said. Tell me.

It's the same each month, the same small conversation, the same talk of weather, her job at the grocery store and her disgusting manager, an overweight man, always picking at the organic candies, pawing a handful of fudge, telling Melissa to wear the other apron with the lace on the top, winking at her. When she speaks of him, I think of my father.

*

We stayed inside my father's house the first day. It rained and I watched the storm while he made coffee. The neighborhood was grey, each house with a chain link fence. A car without a hood sat in one driveway. Across the street, a shivering dog in the backyard. Several homes in the neighborhood were abandoned, the windows broken out, a soaked couch or recliner in the front yards. It was dark inside his own house. Many of the light bulbs were burnt out. And he was thin. His clothes fit him like a scarecrow's would, a blue and brown flannel all loose and hanging away from his body, as though there was nothing beneath but bone. When his coffee was ready, he sat in his dark blue recliner with a cup, holding it with both hands, fingers curled over the lip. I sat across from him on the sofa. He watched me.

How's Mr. Thomas? I said after a while.

Arlo? He's dead.

I thought I saw him in the window when I pulled in, I said.

That's not Arlo, he said, looking out the window, and I began to see something was really off with him.

Rain dripped on the windowpane. I asked him what he had been eating. He told me a woman brought him food; there were empty cans of chicken noodle soup on the counter. He sipped the coffee.

What have you had today? I said.

Some toast this morning, he said. She only comes on Monday's. Sometimes she sits and eats with me for a while.

Today is Monday.

He paused, tapped a finger on his coffee cup. Maybe it's Tuesdays, he said. Anyway, you'd be happy with me. She's a Jew. I met her, what, three or four years ago now. I didn't like her at first, but she keeps coming and I like hearing about her kids and her life. I make her coffee and we sit here.

He said this with confidence then stopped talking, drank the coffee. It seemed like the one thing he was sure about since I had arrived. The skin around his face was sallow and thin, sagging off his cheekbones. His left eyelid drooped and it passed through my mind that he had had a stroke at some point.

Soon he was asleep, the cup overturned in his hands and coffee soaked onto his jeans. I sat, not knowing what to do. Outside, the rain came down. The house leaked, the ceiling bowed in spots, and in the front hallway the wood floor was warped from rainwater and the drywall rotted. The smell of the family room, the mold in the house, made me get up to open a window, but it wouldn't budge. I got it up by shoving a crowbar between windowsill and windowframe and then smacking the end of the

crowbar; the window rushed up with a burst of dead wood, dust filling the room. My father didn't wake. I set the crowbar on the windowsill. Then I went upstairs. The foundation of the house was sunk, the stairs tilted. I went to my old room. It was empty, no bed, no dresser, though the outlines of these things were visible on the wood floor and on the walls.

*

On Tuesday mornings, I hike the Sheltowee trail to Chimney Top Rock. It's a five mile hike, and takes me up through the park, from my cabin to the main Ranger station. I'm deep in a forested canyon for most of the hike, then the trail rises, passes huge limestone boulders on the ground, places where climbers do bouldering exercises, and then I can see the first of Chimney Top, rising up from the forest like a strange mesa. The smell of cedar becomes strong. My legs burn from the constant incline of the trail. Fog hangs up around Chimney Top, and I feel diffuse, like the fog; I'm part of everything around me, the trees, the ground, Chimney Top itself. The breeze rustles the leaves of the trees and it sounds as though the voices of the gods are whispering down on me, and for a short time, I see things as they are.

*

That first night at his house, I bought sandwiches, good hearty roast beef sandwiches, and he ate a whole one and then passed out for an hour. When he woke, the rain had stopped and he rushed to the bathroom and stayed in there for a long time. Then he came out again and sat in his recliner, his body sinking into it, becoming a part of it. He looked sick, his eyes unfocused and tired. He drank three or four cups of water. I had lit

candles; there weren't enough working light bulbs to light the place. After all the water, he asked for a cup of tea. I mixed it with honey and sat with him while he drank it.

Your mother came by the other day, he said, reaching for his cane. He knocked the cane over. She wants me to move back in with her.

In the dark, I stared at him to see if he was joking. Candlelight flickered on his face. I walked over to him, picked the cane off the floor and put it in his hand.

She asked if you made it through law school yet, he said. I told her you were still working on it. When will you be finished? he said, rocking in his recliner, the cane tapping the floor.

I didn't know what to say. I'm taking some time off, I said. I'm working outdoors right now.

Christ, that's the way to do it, my father said. He stood up with the help of the cane, searched the floor with it and moved toward the kitchen, the cane in one hand, the tea in the other. You remember that time we built that lady's house in Taylorville. We got that thing up in no time.

I had helped my father build houses before, but I had never been to anyplace named Taylorville. I turned around and saw that he was not going to the kitchen like I thought. He was headed for the garage door and was trying to adjust the cane and the tea in his hands to open the door. I went over to him, took the mug away and it slipped from my fingers and shattered, tea spilling all over my legs and shoes.

Where're you going? I said, walking to the door, opening it for him, then walking back to the broken mug and picking up the ceramic shards.

I wanted to walk by the Strand, he said. I heard there's something playing there tonight.

The Strand was a theater we had gone to years ago, when my mother was still alive. I'll walk with you, I said.

We walked along the street, sidestepping puddles, and when we got to the theater, it was all boarded up. The front ticket window was an empty box, the glass smashed out. He looked around, then at me. Where am I? he said. What're you doing here? He looked at his watch, loose on his wrist, then back at me. His eyes were red and watery. I forgot you were here, he said. He pulled his flannel shirt around him like it was a robe. I'm sorry, he said. I lose time now and then.

It's alright, I said.

I slip back and forth, he said. I lose it all. What's going on now goes away and it's like I'm living some other part of my life over. He looked up and down the street. Far down, sitting next to a barred corner store, was a black car, exhaust rising from behind it. In the other direction, two older men walked toward us. My father looked at me, his cane tapping on the ground. I do some crazy things, he said and laughed.

We all do, I said.

The two men continued toward us, then switched to our side of the street. My father watched them.

It's okay, I said. They're just walking somewhere.

*

On my hikes, I swing east after seeing Chimney Top and keep climbing, taking the Tunnel Road for some of the hike, the pavement only wide enough for one car on the

turns. At night I drive through the camping areas: twice I've had to break up fights between drunk climbers, which usually ends peacefully and with more drinking. Other times I find the locals fighting. The locals are worse than the climbers; they're rednecks with guns. I've been threatened. Once, when I've found two men poaching, they pointed their shotguns at me, laughing, after I told them they'd have to leave the deer and I'd have to call them in. It was morning, on my usual hike, and I didn't know what to do with the guns pointed at me. I don't carry a gun. I let them take the two deer they killed and cursed their idiocy when I walked away.

When I hike, I think of the other people in the park. They come on weekends for climbing, rafting, drinking, illegal hunting, fishing; they compete, argue, fight, get lost, and then go home and do the same. It seems to me that they don't see the world around them; they're skimming the surface, frantic, like a bug on water, forgetting how to live slow, quiet, deep in and among things. They speak as if they hadn't uttered a word in years, as though they alone know the park and they alone are the only ones with troubles. To me, their worries are loveless and trivial and barren. I know all these people; I choose to be alone.

At Rough Trail I leave the road and move into the forest again, always climbing, breathing heavy and thighs burning, and soon the trees thin out and the limestone arches are visible in shadow, outline. Soon there's more light. There's Angel Windows, a series of small arches, and there's Half Moon arch, the stone so smooth and burnt orange against the blue sky it looks sculpted, and hiking the trails I feel I'm living the life I've always wanted to live. Birds erupt from a tree beside me, scatter in the air, and then settle again onto branches.

*

That night, he slept in the family room in his recliner. I walked through the house. The wood floors creaked and settled, and I felt if I stepped in a wrong place, I'd go through the floor. Wiring had been pulled through the drywall, light fixtures taken down from the ceiling, leaving bare bulbs. Dust and chunks of drywall lined the hallway. In his bedroom, there were dirty clothes on the floor. On the bed were pictures of him and his marine mates in civvies: fishing off some beach, drinking from a bottle, a cheap classical guitar played by one of them, smiling women I'd never seen. I tried to pick out my father and I guessed he was the one fishing; the man in the pictures, the man from my memories, I could not see in the man sleeping in the recliner. I gathered the photographs and put them in a faded manila envelope. In the top dresser drawer were a bowie knife and a pistol, old newspaper clippings, and photographs of my mother. The photos were in black and white, and she was prettier than I remembered. There were pictures of me and her, her arm wrapped around me and me in my school uniform. I was smiling in all the pictures, and so was she.

I opened another drawer and found his whites. I opened the next and found a box full of letters, medals, a harmonica, more pictures, a clipboard from when he was a high school football coach, the pages of plays written in pencil and faded, and a shoebox full of rusted pocketknives, many of the blades broken. I put the harmonica in the shoebox with the knives and picked up the pictures. Two of the pictures were of my father's different woodshop classes. Each year, after the first day of class, he came home and told us how many kikes, spics, and nigs he had in his class. This was casual observation, like noting the day's weather.

Got four blacks and probably four Jews, he'd say to my mother over dinner. And I've got that Timberton boy, too, from down the road.

What are you going to start off with this year? my mother would say, trying to push the conversation in another direction.

I sat down on his bed and dust rose off it. The sheets were dirty and there was a tear in them so that I could see the mattress. I put my face closer to the bed and stood up. I remembered sitting in my room nights he came back from football games, waiting to hear if they won or not: Those boys played tonight, he'd say, his voice echoing through the house, filling it up, taking over, pushing me up out of the book I was reading. So, I'd grab my baseball glove and toss a ball and catch it while he went on. They fucking played for once, he'd say. But that Tope-boy can run that ball. If they lost, his story changed; after one loss, he got into a fistfight with the father of a Jewish boy and gave the man two black eyes.

When my mother asked him why he acted like such a fool, one of the few times she stood up for anything, he yelled at her so long, so hard, explaining why he was right, that she left the house to sleep in the Y. Sometime after she left, he came to my room.

Your mom'll be staying at the Y tonight, he said.

I didn't say anything to him, didn't respond, just watched his flared up face calming after his anger, his body big in the doorway, wondering how I'd come from such a person.

Then it's just you and me, tonight, he had said. Come out if you want, his voice strangely and suddenly gentler, smaller. I'm gonna turn on the television, he said, and closed my door.

*

Over the next few days, we cleaned the place, went to eat fast food, and I convinced him to see a doctor. He had been in diabetic shock – I cursed myself for not seeing it at first, for simply thinking he'd gone nuts; there was the weight loss, not eating; all the coffee and water he was drinking. The doctor took care of him, gave him instructions for insulin shots, meters to check blood levels, all of which he showed me how to use, and in a week, my father felt better and perked up. I've haven't felt like this in years, he said. You're lucky you're not dead, I told him, to which he replied, That's a hell of thing to say. A nasty thing to say to your old man, he said, but he smiled some, laughing. And I felt I'd done my good deed, forgiven him in some unspoken way.

Still, I wanted to be sure about things. I packed a bag for him. He insisted on bringing all of his marine photographs and papers, so I packed a box with these things. Then we drove to the park some five hundred miles away. I was glad to be going home. I told him it would be a short vacation, a change to get his strength back up, recover himself, and then I'd bring him home, or we'd think about moving him closer to me.

When we got to the park, we wound our way up on Tunnel Road, passing ranger stations, a group of cross country runners jogging down a hill. He watched the forest out the window. We came to the camper area, a line of RV's, and then to my cabin on a hill, overlooking the main camp area. I walked him from the truck, inside the cabin. A fly buzzed in after us. My father looked around.

That's where you'll be sleeping, I said, pointing at his bed. I'll get you some sheets.

He sat on his bed and stared at the place. The fly landed on his bed, buzzed away, and landed again. He watched the fly, looking amused. Then he took in the cabin: a small television next to the sink, a transistor radio and a camcorder on a bookshelf, along with wildlife footage that I'd recorded. In the corner, near his bed, there were snow shoes I had never used and cross country skis. Nature books stacked on the floor next to the snowshoes, tree books, bird books, guide books for living in the woods; a few literary ones, and a number of law books from when my father tried to put me through law school.

This isn't so bad, he said, sitting on his bed. I could make you a table if you get me some lumber. Do you have any guns?

There's a small arsenal in the ranger station, I said.

An arsenal, he said. That's funny. What do you have in there?

I know what an arsenal is, I said. It's just what we call it. There's a couple shotguns, a rifle, flare guns.

What do you have a rifle for?

I don't know, I said. I don't use guns.

No, he said. You wouldn't.

I set a towel on the bed next to him. Then I went to the door. I have things to take care of, I said. I'll be back tonight.

I'll come with you, he said.

Just stay here, I said. You look tired anyway. I opened the door and went down the dirt path toward the truck. Melissa was walking up the road, carrying two Tupperware containers. A grove of pines swayed behind her, the wind whipping her hair.

Hey, she said, waving and quickly putting the hand back to the tupperware. I brought you guys some lunch for the week. She walked past me to the door of the cabin. It's sloppy Joe stuff, she said.

Bring it by later, I said. I've got to get some things done.

Well go get some things done and I'll meet your dad. Introduce me first. She seemed small to me, standing before the cabin door, holding Tupperware filled with sloppy joe. I wondered if she'd see me differently once she met my father. I walked her inside the cabin, holding the door for her.

My father had the camcorder out and was sitting on his bed with it. He watched us come in. A real gentlemen, he said, setting down the camcorder and chuckling to himself.

Not now, I said. This is Melissa, she just wants to say hello.

They shook hands. Melissa still had the Tupperware and one of the containers slipped from her grip, hit the floor. The lid popped off and sloppy joe splattered on everyone's shoes. My father got the worst of it, sloppy joe dripping from his pants legs.

Jesus Christ, he said.

Dad, don't be a prick. Melissa looked at me.

I'm not being a prick, he said. She spilled chili on my legs.

It's sloppy joe mix, Melissa said. And I'm sorry about that. She went to the kitchen, grabbed a roll of paper towels and kneeled, started wiping up the mess.

She gets down on those knees fast, he said.

Dad, for Christ's sake.

I'm joking. Melissa, I'm sorry, I'm just kidding with you. Get up. Here. Up. Let him clean it up.

I looked at the two of them, our shoes stained, Melissa still holding the one container. The room smelled of stale tomato sauce. I think I'll let you work this out, I said. I do have work to do, like I told you both. Again, I went outside, the smell of rain in the air, the wind swishing through the pines and I was glad to be alone for a while.

*

When I got back to the cabin, it was empty. I listened at the bathroom, knocked on the door, then tried the handle and found the bathroom empty, too. There was a note from Melissa: *Had a beer with your father. We got started on the wrong foot and now we're started on a better one. You were a dick, though. Just thought I'd let you know so you can say you're sorry. I'll be waiting.* I tossed the note on the counter and went out, got in my truck, and hooked up the spotlight. Down the main road, past the campers, I saw him standing with the Sadler lady. Mrs. Sadler was a regular in the park. She was retired, long grey hair, and hauled two waverunners behind her camper for her grandchildren. She always smelled of cigarette smoke and her right hand was yellowed. She had a country accent, thick with ignorance. I turned off the spotlight, stopped and got out. They stood in the light of her trailer, an awning covering the door. They walked toward me, moving away from the trailer, meeting me in an open grassy area, the limbs of a huge oak over our heads, the trunk of the tree twenty feet away. My father was talking to Ms. Sadler very fast.

There some assholes you're going to take care of? Ms. Sadler said, stopping him in mid-sentence, indicating my spotlight.

I was looking for him, I said, patting my father on the back. I watched the light on top of her trailer, a swarm of flies and moths.

Well, some folks I saw on the trail told me that they saw some suspicious looking people. Junkies, probably. It was down near the Buck Trail entrance. I saw some kids going pretty fast down the Tunnel Road, too.

Okay, I'll look into it, I said. On the other side of the road, I heard something in the tree line and turned, waiting for a deer to appear. The woods stared back, the grey trunks of trees and dark canopy overhead, leaves falling in the wind. I turned back, Mrs. Sadler talking again, picking up the butt of a cigarette and flicking it toward the trashcan at the back of her trailer. There were fast food wrappers and Styrofoam cups piling out of her trashcan, paper strewn about in the grass.

But if it's those junkies down near Buck Trail, we don't need them here, she said.

I'll look into it, Mrs. Sadler. Like I always look into it. If you could do something for me though, just pick up your trash when you get the chance. I've asked you about this several times.

Are you going now? my father said. I'd like to see you at work.

Not now, I said. I just want to eat some dinner.

I'll meet you back there, then, he said, not looking at me. Let me tell you about Carl Eversol, he said to Mrs. Sadler.

What are you two talking about? I said.

Mrs. Sadler took a cigarette from the pack in her pocket. She offered one to my father. He took it and they lit up, the glow of their cigarettes bouncing in the dark. He

coughed for a minute then held his chest and spat on the ground. Above us, the huge oak shook in the wind, spilling down leaves.

My father looked at me. Her husband was in the marines, he said. We were trying to see if we had any mutual friends.

Well? I said.

Nothing so far, Ms. Sadler said. I think I heard of this Carl Eversol though. He sounds like the type of wild man my husband used to hang around with.

Carl did wild stuff, my father said.

I was tired, hungry. I don't think you should be talking about these things, I said.

Why not? he said. I'll talk about what I want to talk about.

Okay, I said, trying to lighten up. Let's go get some food. I'm starving.

I already ate, he said. I want to ask her some questions.

What did you eat?

We had fried trout sandwiches, Ms. Sadler said. I got a fry-daddy. We fried up some fish and I got these great hoagie rolls.

Okay, I said. Just c'mere a sec, okay, dad? I pulled him over to my truck and I spoke quiet to him, shielding our conversation with my body. Look, I said. First off, you can't be eating fried food all the time or smoking. We have to watch what you're eating and stuff or you'll go into shock again.

I had a little sandwich. This is my first cigarette.

Second, Ms. Sadler, she's a fine woman.

She's crude, my father said.

That's true.

She likes talking about her husband though. And I like listening to her.

Okay, I said. I understand. Just know that you maybe shouldn't be talking about these things too much. You were so mixed up. Plus, she's a bit off, you know.

Yeah, he said. I know. The same way you feel about me.

I don't feel that way about you. You're doing better in this last week. I just want it to stay that way. Anyway, I didn't think you liked these type of people.

What type of people? he said. Look, I like talking to her and listening to her. I like talking about my friends, what they've been doing. I'll be back later.

He walked back to Ms. Sadler, leading his steps with his cane, the gravel road crunching beneath his feet. I got in my truck and started it up.

*

He sat with Ms. Sadler outside her camper every day. They shifted their position according to the sun, finding the shade. They always fell asleep mid-morning though, and got sun on their faces and hands. He came home in the afternoons. One day, his blood sugar was too low and I fed him a candy bar and gave him an extra shot and he slept straight through the afternoon until the next morning. Another day, he threw up after eating fried steaks and ice cream at Mrs. Sadler's. After some time though, his face looked fuller, and after a few weeks, his hands no longer shook. His clothes fit him better. Once, I found him walking with Mrs. Sadler to her RV, one hand on her back. Another time, sitting out with him, she was putting sun tan lotion on his neck and face. I wondered what was going on in his head, why he liked this woman so much.

He kept improving. Once the diabetes was under control, he didn't forget who I was or think he was living in the past – it was as the doctor said, shock, and an isolated

incident. In the cabin, no clothes were left out and he did his own dishes, kept his area clean, kept quiet at night. His paranoia disappeared, lost now to the world I brought him to. Still, there were other things that got to me: his smell invaded the cabin, a mixture of cigarette and sweat; he clapped the birds away in the morning; he wandered off without telling me, and I had to search for him as though he was a little boy. One day I found him walking two high school kids to the ranger station. They were on the Tunnel Road, the two boys in front of him, one tall with long hair, one shorter, stocky, both with heads down. He was wearing one of my ranger shirts. I pulled alongside him in my truck.

I got a catch for you, he said. I found them doing god knows what under a bridge.

This is not your job, I said. You can't wear that shirt and go around doing whatever you want.

I'm not doing whatever I want, he said. I'm helping you out. I thought it would be fun if we could do something together.

What happened?

They were stripped down to underwear, he said. Kissing on each other.

You're kidding, I said.

That's bullshit, the tall kid said, brushing his long hair out of his eyes.

My father smiled. Couple lovebirds having at it.

He's lying, the tall kid said. He found us drinking beer and took it from us. He drank two of them. Asshole.

My father was laughing now. I looked at the kids, told them to stop drinking in the park, and sent them on their way.

Why'd you do that? he said.

You're impersonating a ranger, I said. That's a worse crime than teenagers drinking.

There's no such thing, he said, laughing. Is there?

*

I worked during the day and came back at night to him, the television on a ballgame. He wanted the window closed at night because he got cold and I awoke through the night and in the mornings to snoring and farting, the place stinking, dead flies lining the windows.

He asked me to get him a carving knife, some tools, and blocks of wood. All of which I did. Soon there were wooden turtles, birds, and trees in the cabin, and little bits of wood and sawdust on the floor. When he wasn't with Ms. Sadler, he lingered in the welcome center playing pool. A large window in the center of the complex overlooks the lake and he played pool in the afternoons next to that window, taking breaks between shots, smoking cigarettes and staring out, watching the people on the lake sitting on the man-made beach. Children from the beach came into the center, and I decided to introduce my father, since they all knew me. Soon he knew many of them. He played games of pool with them.

One afternoon, a man named Sean Williams complemented me after my father played with his kids on the beach throwing a baseball. Williams wore khaki shorts and a short-sleeve button down shirt tucked into the shorts. It was a busy Saturday and Melissa was helping out on one of the registers. I just finished helping a small brown woman in a white tanktop and shorts make cabin arrangements. As she walked away, I watched her smooth legs all the way to the parking lot.

What are you looking at? Melissa said.

Mr. Williams laughed, then said, Your father's great. The kids really get a kick out of him. He leaned on the counter. Sunlight came through the front windows, triangles of light on the wood floor. Wilson's shadow stood in one triangle.

That's funny, I said. He wasn't always that way.

I can't believe it, Williams said. My wife loves him, too.

Well, I'm glad he's working out for you, I said, and watched two longhaired, hippie-looking guys walk in, stare at the climbing gear we had displayed on the wall behind the registers.

What's with you today? Melissa said, pulling her hair into a ponytail and then letting it fall over her shoulders. She looked back at my father, in the separate pool room, big double doors wide open. A painting of a desert hut on one wall, the big window overlooking the lake filling up the other wall. He's just shooting pool, leave him alone, she said.

I ignored Melissa. Come on around, I said to the hippie guys. If you want a closer look. They did and they stepped around Melissa and I, looking over pairs of climbing shoes, netted on top and rubbery soled. They reeked of cigarettes.

You want to get in on a game with us, Williams said. We could play some cutthroat. Or you could play Melissa. We could do doubles.

I'll play, Melissa said, punching the open button on her cash register, the door dinging open and closed.

We've got work to do, I said, and pushed Melissa's drawer closed.

You can play a game of pool, Williams said, stilling leaning on the counter and picking at stickers and pens in a jar. Hell, all you do is walk the trails anyway, right?

I don't just walk the trails, I said. I'm looking for solicitors and people violating park policy. Did you know that if someone got lost out here, they could die? Even in the summer. Forget the cold winters. And there are people breaking into cars and stealing shit from campsites. Poachers come out here. A ranger in this park was killed one year. You don't think I've got shit to do.

Williams threw up his hands and walked back toward the pool tables where my father was standing. Melissa looked at me. The hippie guys thanked us and went out into the park. The door to the complex stayed open and I could see the green fields shifting under a clouded sky, shadows and light moving over the land. I wanted to be out there.

Mr. Williams played a game of pool with my father. I don't know what they talked about, but as I checked in another camper and took his money, I heard them talking, laughing, smacking the pools balls around. I looked back and they were staring out the large window, my father smoking and using a pool cue to hold himself up, looking at the beach. My father was pointing out a woman in a bikini with his cigarette, Mr. Williams laughing under his breath, saying, Stop. God, you're going to get me in trouble.

What's the harm in a little trouble? my father said.

Jeanie would kill me, Williams said.

Let her kill you, my father said. Let her see, I say. There's nothing like a little trouble to get the blood going. She'll be wild in the sack if you let her know that you've got a pair of eyes in that skull of yours. Now, he said. Look at that one over there. She's a pretty one. Williams nodded. There was a pause in their conversation. You got a lot of

blacks, here, my father said. It was never like that, you know, when I was your age. You could avoid it easy. I mean, I've worked with blacks and Jews at the school I taught at, but you can avoid it. Look at that black girl there.

Are you listening to this? I said to Melissa, wanting her on my side.

She shrugged. He's from a different time, she said. I don't like it, but he's just talking.

They shot another game of pool. The sky grew dark out the window, thunderheads balling up above the lake. My father tried a few more jokes, but Mr. Williams wasn't laughing anymore. He'd closed up, I could tell, his shoulders tight, his eyes on the game. After they finished the game, Mr. Williams walked out of the complex without saying goodbye to me.

*

I wanted him to leave; I had done my part. He was better. Instead, he ventured out into the park more. On a Wednesday, during my evening hike, I found him sitting with Mr. Williams and Mr. Roeteger, a black man who asked me where the good fishing spots were and once showed me the scar on his stomach from surgery he'd had to make his stomach smaller. The three men sat on a boulder overlooking the Red River, a ball game on the radio behind them. They were fishing, their lines dropped into the moving water. The creek ran by the spot I was at, too, the water so clear I could see the fish standing in stream, reflecting the sun like mirrors. In the binoculars, none of them were talking. Above me, a woodpecker tapped on a tree. I watched until the sun went down; mosquitoes and flies buzzed around my face and I swatted them away. In the distance, the evening drained the color from the sky, the forest and canyon in a blue haze. A

campfire against the side of the canyon lit up yellow against the dark blue background of the forest hills. An illegal fire outside the camping area. Bugs hummed in the air, darkness already up in the trees above me. My father took his rod, put it in the back of Roeteger's truck, and said something I couldn't hear, and walked off, using his cane. Roeteger continued to fish and Williams waved at my father. I went back through the park to my truck and picked him up on the way back to our cabin.

We drove without talking and then he said, Go slower. I like this time of day.

There was a last bit of dark blue sky above the tree line, and above that, darkness and stars. I could smell a fish smell coming from him.

How can you sit with Mr. Roeteger? I said.

Who's Mr. Roeteger?

That man you were fishing with, I said. His name's Bill Roeteger.

Relax, he said. I know his name.

So how can you sit there?

What do you mean?

You know what I mean.

I was just fishing, he said. I don't like being spied on. You should know that much.

I wasn't spying, I said.

Good. Because we plan on fishing next weekend, too. He's got a good little spot there and said Williams and I could join him whenever we wanted. You should come and fish with us. We could bring a few beers.

You would have hated him when I was growing up. You wouldn't even have talked to him. Shit, you might have decked him if he said something you didn't like.

People change, he said.

No they don't, I said. They only pretend to.

You're not being fair, he said. I know I've made mistakes.

You made more mistakes than you're willing to own up to, I said.

You're being a shit, he said. You were always good at being a shit. You act like you never said or did anything bad.

I didn't say any more. The truck rose up over a hill in the road and kept rising. If it was still light, we would have been able to see down into the park, the hills stretching away toward the horizon. Over another hill I slammed on the brakes, a lump in the middle of the road. I put the truck in park and turned on my brights.

Deer, my father said. We both got out and my father moved fast toward the animal, his cane clicking on the road. It was a doe, its hind legs broken, dragged across the pavement by a car. Fur stuck up from the road. Blood smeared the pavement. I looked into the forest but saw nothing, no movement. He leaned down using his cane and put his hand near the animal's mouth. Go get a gun, he said.

Are you sure?

He looked at me. I'm pretty sure, he said.

I started back to the truck and turned when I got to the driver side door. Are you coming? I said.

I'll wave off any cars, he said. You almost hit the thing again.

I sped back to the nearest ranger station and picked up a rifle, loaded it and drove back. My father stood next to the deer; it was strange seeing him in the headlights, his eyes looking down, his body leaning on the cane, the deer next to him on the ground. In the headlights, the scene looked ultra-real, staged, something from a movie. I got out of the truck with the rifle.

Give it here, he said, reaching for the gun. He grabbed the gun and tried to yank it from me. The deer pawed the ground with its front legs. Its eyes shined in the headlights.

I've done this plenty of times, I said, pulling the shotgun away, but he had a grip on it, pulled again, and the gun went off, recoiling and smacking him in the chin. The bullet thunked into the stomach of the deer, and the animal kicked and grunted. My father fell back, onto his butt, and blood ran from his chin down his neck.

Are you alright? I said.

I think I broke my hip. I can't move. I can't get up.

I'll call for help. Don't move. Rest there.

I'm kidding, he said. I'm okay. Don't you watch any tv? You've got to lighten up, son.

Fuck, I spat, my heart beat pulsing in head. What the fuck did you do that for?

I thought you didn't believe in guns, he said, wiping the blood from his chin. He smiled.

Dad, shut the fuck up. I lowered the rifle, my hands shaking. The deer lifted its head, blood now seeping from the stomach wound. I steadied the rifle, trained it behind the ear of the animal and fired.

*

Melissa was at the cabin when we made it back. She sat with her back against the front door, two bowls in her lap, one of them a salad. A moon rose up behind the tree line. Cicadas droned. My father and I got out of the truck. He held his shirt up against his mouth.

I completely forgot, I said to Melissa, finding my key.

What happened? she said. Did you two get in a fist fight?

There was a deer, my father said. Let him tell you. I didn't know he knew how to shoot a gun.

Of course I know how to shoot a gun, I said.

We all went inside. Melissa sat my father down on his bed, looked at his split chin. I got the first aid kit from above the sink and set it beside him.

We can go to the hospital, I said. Or I can sew you up.

Take him to the urgent care, Melissa said.

A knock came at the door and then Ms. Sadler stuck her head in. I heard gunshots, she said. Did you guys catch anyone?

It was just an injured deer, I said.

Christ, what happened?

They got in a fistfight, Melissa said.

Ms. Sadler looked at Melissa. She walked to the bed and sat beside my father, the bed sinking under their weight. She put a hand on his shoulder, one on his thigh.

The gun recoiled, I said. He got hit, that's all.

I was being stupid, my father said. I wanted to shoot the deer and I tried to pull the gun from him. I shouldn't have done that.

Melissa grabbed a bottle of alcohol from under the kitchen sink.

*

He didn't want to go to the hospital, so I had to sew him up. I numbed his lower lip and chin with a topical ointment. Then I tried to thread a needle, but my hands were shaking so I asked Melissa to do it. When the needle was ready, I told him to sit on the edge of the bed and stick his chin out. He did and I sat on a chair pulled close to the bed and steadied my hands the best I could. His hands were folded in his lap, one hand holding the other. With my left hand, I cleaned the split chin with alcohol. It was a clean cut and so deep I thought I could see bone. I pressed the split together, blood seeping out. With my right hand, I sewed, watching the cut come together, only looking at his face once, his eyes open and staring across the room. He kept very still. I felt his rough face as I did the stitching. His breath was warm on my hands. I could smell the fish smell on him still. It took five stitches altogether and seemed to take forever. Afterward, we all drank a bottle of wine in coffee mugs.

I need this, my father said, taking a swig of the wine.

Melissa and I sat on the wood floor. My father lay on the bed and Ms. Sadler sat with his head in her lap and he pulled the box of pictures from under the bed. A fly kept landing on his face and he swatted it away. He showed her pictures of his marine buddies, woodshop classes, then he showed her my mother.

This was taken on the Muskingum River, he said. We all went on a canoe trip. You couldn't have been more than three or four years old, he said, looking at me. We

probably shouldn't have been out there with you at that age, but you liked the water so much. Do you remember that trip?

I told him no.

We used to take you all the time. Every weekend. This was the first time we went. I usually did the rowing and you and your mother pointed out things. Snakes, fish, birds. You were always wanting in the water, but it was a rough little river. Anyway, she decided she wanted to row and I was showing her how, sitting behind her, and she just swung the oar and completely missed the water that first stroke. The oar smacked me in the nose. It was a wooden oar, heavy, not the plastic ones they use now. It pretty near broke my nose right there. Well, we were laughing and we tipped the canoe. You were in a life jacket and started floating off. Don't you remember this?

I shook my head. I didn't remember anything about that time or about any canoe trips on the weekend. I couldn't see the scene, couldn't picture it.

You got caught in the current, but I swam you down, brought you to the shore and we waited for your mom to get the canoe going again. You said you weren't scared at all.

Ms. Sadler pulled wisps of his thin hair, made them stand up on his head. He smiled and said this reminded him a little of that time, and he pointed at his chin. The stitches were black on his face; there would be a scar. I wondered if he was reminded of anything else, any other moments that I didn't know about. I wanted him to keep talking, but he didn't. I watched him shuffling through the pictures, smiling up at Ms. Sadler, her hand running through his hair.

HALLOWEEN

Molly left sometime at the beginning of September. She left early in the morning with two suitcases, her bike, two fishing poles and a George Foreman grille. She'd gone before, after one of our fights, and she'd drove around and come back an hour or so later. This was different. I followed her on the driveway, carrying the grille. It was early in the morning, and clouds moved fast across the sky though I couldn't feel any wind.

Don't you think it's too early for a decision like this? I said.

She looked at me, put a suitcase into the back of the Bronco. I handed her the grille. Please don't be funny, she said.

I paused, watched her then looked up the street. There were some birds on a telephone wire and they flew up from it then back down to it, like they couldn't decide where to go. How long will you be gone? I said.

She shook her head. We don't fit, she said. My heart doesn't fit with yours.

That's from a song, I said.

She put the other suitcase in. It's how I feel, she said. You exhaust me. You tire me out.

I'll change, I said.

She shook her head, got in the car. I'll call to check on Toby, she said, and drove off.

Now it's a week from Halloween and Toby paces back and forth in the family room. I'm sitting on the sofa, watching tv. Two oil paintings of sailboats hang above the television. The blue paint is thick on one of the sails and part of it has fallen off, leaving

this indention in the painting. They're both Molly's. I picked at the oil on the blue sailboat once and Molly got mad at me, slapped my hand away.

I look back at the tv. Toby keeps getting in the way of it, but I don't say anything. I let him pace, inspect everything I have lain out: a cheap Jason Voorhies hockey mask, a shredded up janitor-looking uniform, fake blood. No weapon yet. The pants have to be shortened to fit him and the tube of blood is old, maybe hardened, but otherwise things look okay. He's working a piece of gum, cracking it. I can't tell what's on his mind.

I could get some wire from the garage, I say. Or a baseball bat.

He looks toward the garage, nods. I sip my beer and set it on the coffee table, watching how the television light turns the liquid a shade of green. Light flickers from the two pumpkins on the kitchen counter.

He circles the costume now, no longer pacing, one hand on his chin, the other on top of his head. He nods his head then shakes it then nudges the costume with his foot and says, I don't want to be him this year.

Who do you want to be?

I want to be him, he says, pointing at the television. We're watching *Gandhi* on tv; I didn't even realize he'd been paying attention to it.

You want to go as Ben Kingsley?

He rolls his eyes. I want to be Gandhi, he says.

I look at Jason on the floor, the clothes empty like his body finally gave up, turned to dust. I don't want to make a new costume. I want to sit and tell him to go to bed so I can watch tv. Okay, I say. But you're supposed to be something frightening like everyone else. But if that's what you want.

He shakes his head like it's a serious thing, this change.

Okay, I say. Let's do it.

We try out a new costume. He wants to try it out tonight. I dress him in an old bed sheet, put some of his mother's bronzing oil on him. He asks if he can shave his head, but I tell him that isn't going to work out. He really pushes for it while I put the bronzing oil on him. Eventually, while he's rubbing the oil on his chest, I tell him we'll get him glasses and a swim cap we can paint the color of skin.

After we're finished with the new costume and Toby's all suited up, I sit on the sofa watching him, tv light radiating around him, making his body dark, some aura around him. He practices famous sayings, the only ones I can remember, An eye for an eye and everyone's blind, something about nonviolence being the first part of faith. I can't remember exactly, so I just make it up as I go, explaining what nonviolence means, that you aren't supposed to hurt anyone or anything.

Not even bugs? he says.

It's strict, I say, and I don't feel like I'm talking to my son. Can you keep it up all night?

He shrugs and continues practicing, going up to various doors in the house, knocking, presenting a pillowcase, bowing, putting his hands together in prayer, sitting on the floor like he'd seen Gandhi do. He seems to like the role and the eye for an eye thing, keeps repeating it at each fake door he knocks on, using it instead of trick or treat. After a while, *Gandhi* ends and Toby heads up to bed. I blow out the candles in the pumpkins and grab another beer from the fridge, glad he's gone. I drink in front of the sink because I don't want to go back to the family room, don't want to do anything.

Then I hear him upstairs, moving from bathroom to bedroom, the floorboards creaking. I know he's still practicing because I hear knocking. For a second I think I'll yell up, tell him to be quiet. But I don't care really, don't have the energy for it. I close my eyes. I hear the creaks in the ceiling and I follow them, creeping a little into his life. I wonder what Molly would say about this, hearing him up there. I want to call her now, tell her about it. I can't do that though. Our last conversation happened about a week ago and I got the feeling I should hold off on calling her.

Halloween's coming up, I had said.

Please, she said. Don't call here again.

Toby's getting excited. I remember you guys dressing up last year. You remember? The snow-dog idea.

I've asked you not to call, she said. Just give me some time.

I said, Wait, but she had hung up.

Toby stops knocking on doors upstairs and the house is quiet. I drink a little more from my beer then feel some ache in my stomach, have to pour the rest down the sink. I feel hot all over and go to the family room and sit on the sofa, take of my shirt. I flick through the channels then mute the tv then turn it off altogether. I rub my stomach, feeling how warm it is. I can't tell if I'm hungry or what, but I don't want to get up to make anything. I try to picture what Molly's doing at her mother's place. The one time I went there we played poker for money and her mother took twenty-five dollars off me. She wore a brown wig and was stone-faced the whole game. I had told Molly afterward that I liked her mother, and for some reason, I did. I had told her that I saw where she got

it now. She said, Got what? And I said, Don't be daft. She smiled and hugged me. I'm a tough one, aren't I? she said. Only sometimes, I told her.

I drum a beat on my stomach, wonder if Molly's playing now. If maybe she's with somebody else and he's playing with them, Molly's mother sitting there, a brick. I feel like I'm sweating and I open the front door to let a little air in.

The day of Halloween I go to a sports store and buy Toby a swim cap. After that I drive to a Lens Crafters. The store's so white, mirrors everywhere. Rows of glasses line the two back walls and the front of the store is windows. A woman comes up to me after I look around for a minute. I ask if she has any old wire frames with lenses. She has tiny glasses and blond hair, and asks me if I need an eye test. Her nametag says Rhonda. No thanks, Rhonda, I say. Just something for a costume. She says they usually don't do this kind of thing, and I fit a pair of Ralph Lauren glasses on my face, show my teeth, tell her it's very important to a friend of mine, a kid that wants to have a good Halloween. In a nearby mirror I look like a lawyer, like these glasses are glasses to negotiate in. Rhonda smiles and disappears to the back of the store, says she'll see what she can do.

I try on different pairs of glasses while I wait, each pair bringing out something different in my face. Rhonda brings out a pair of wire-frame sunglasses.

All we've got, she says.

The glasses have oval frames, with dark lenses. They feel light, fragile. I put them on and look at her. I look at myself in the mirror, my eyes shaded. I'm thinner since Molly left and I don't like looking at myself. I take them off quick, smile and offer

fifteen bucks for the pair. She thinks about it for a second then says, Okay, and takes the money.

I wear the glasses on the ride home. It's warm out, windy. I turn up the radio, search for something by *the Beatles*, finally settle on Springsteen, and roll down the window. I run my hand through the breeze. With the window down, the wind drowns out the radio. There's this neat little pocket of no-breeze right where the sideview mirror is, and I move my hand up into the wind, back down into the safe little pocket, then up into the wind again, surfing it.

When I get home, it's beginning to get dark and Toby's sitting on the front porch. There's an ant war between his legs and he's got a stick, poking at it.

Hey, I say. I thought you'd be ready. C'mon we gotta eat a quick dinner.

I'm not going, he says.

I just got your swim cap, I say.

I don't feel like going. Is that okay with you?

Jesus Christ, Tobe, I say. I ran out and did this for nothing?

He doesn't say anything. He lifts his leg and puts a foot down in the middle of the ant war. I hear the crunching.

C'mon, I say, trying to sound sincere. It'll be fun.

He goes inside. I shake my head so he doesn't see it.

He was bad the first few weeks she was gone. He didn't want to do anything, stopped going to soccer practice. I decided to do a talk with him so I took him out on a Sunday. We were throwing the football at the high school field. Storm clouds moved far

in the distance. The stands still were messy from Fridays' game. Popcorn boxes and Coke cups and other trash blew around, made crinkling and cupping sounds on the metal bleachers.

I threw a button-hook to Toby and when he turned to get it it smacked him right in the face.

You gotta be ready, I said. Button-hook.

He jogged back to me to run another pattern and threw the ball at me hard. I threw it back. He missed it and trapped it between his legs. Let's just go, he said.

We've only been here ten minutes.

You don't want to be here, he said, moving the ball around with a foot.

Look, I said, trying to think of what to tell him, trying to guess why he had said that. Your mom just needs a break, I said. Think of it as a vacation.

Oh, he said. Yeah. Vacation. That's crap.

You can be a real smart-ass, Toby. A real ass-hole. Why don't you shut-up and listen to me a second?

He kicked the ball at me and started walking off the field.

I picked up the ball and slapped it. I said *shit* under my breath and jogged after him. Hey, I said. Hold up. We didn't say anything for a second, then I said, She'll be back, bud. She's just working some things out.

He was crying and stopped when he heard me. Why hasn't she called?

She will, I said. Just wait.

I got him out on the field again. We didn't run any patterns. His cheeks were flushed and he stood about twelve yards away, moving slow to catch the ball like he was

bored by the whole thing. We tossed around for a little, both tired, both missing catches, more like we were pretending to play than actually playing. Soon, a storm came in from behind the bleachers. The trash in the stands blew around and gathered on the east end. We went home before it began to rain.

Night comes quick so I do a quick dinner, grilled cheese and potato chips. Toby thinks it's good since he's now a vegetarian. He feels better and I decide he just needed a little food. He asks if vegetarians can eat candy and I tell him that as long as no animals are harmed making the candy, I don't see why not.

I skip eating dinner and read a book of Molly's called *One Hundred Things To Do Before You Die*. Number sixty-one is to go to Count Dracula's castle. I read with the sunglasses on while Toby finishes his chips, crunching up the kitchen.

Ease up a bit, I say. Mouth closed.

He pours some more chips onto his plate.

We don't have time, I say.

He looks at me.

Go get your bag, I say. Let's get going.

He doesn't ask for the glasses, so I keep them on all night, even dress up in an old disco shirt, leave the top buttons undone and try to make my hair look like Danny Zuko, though the bald patch in back makes it difficult. I leave a basket of candy on our porch with a note that reads *Please Take Two Only*. It's filled with Snickers and Kit-Kat bars.

Some high school kids will probably swipe the whole thing, basket and all, just like we used to, but I try it anyway.

We stand on the front porch a minute, watch the sky go dark, porch lights flicker on, ghosts emerge from their houses, starting the trek. In the dark, with my glasses shading everything, Toby's a pretty good Gandhi. I tell him so, even go back inside and grab the camera for a few pictures. We start up our street first and see Paul and Mary Tomkins, their kid, Gregory, dressed up as a stalk of corn.

You could eat him, Tobe, and not feel bad about it, I say. He looks at me, then says, Why's he a piece of corn? We all smile as we pass except Gregory, either fully into his corn act or not at all.

At the Morgan's place, Toby explains his views about violence and Mr. Morgan pours into his pillowcase. He takes our picture on the sidewalk.

Let me get the moon, he says, kneeling on the ground, taking the shot angling up at us, the moon in the background.

Toby puts his hands together in prayer at his chest; I give a Travolta-like-disco stance; Clayton clicks the camera. We continue down the street, at each house Toby expelling some wisdom, or the two pieces he knows. His bag begins to fill. I have to tell him to pick it up off the sidewalk, not drag it.

You'll get a hole and lose everything, I say.

He doesn't even look at me.

On Aberdeen, as we're making our turn, Clay and Janice Miller stand at the corner, peering down the street. They both greet Toby first with a slight bow, and I shake

Clay's hand, then am unsure what to do with Janice. I shake her hand quick and awkward. Up the walkway of the house, I don't see their kids so I ask where they are.

Down the street, Clay says. They've got a group this year. We're following at a distance.

What's Mike dressed as? Toby says.

Jesus, Janice says. And Coley Ryan is Mary Magdalene.

Christ, I say. What happened to Halloween?

Neither of the Miller's smile. They're in this church youth group, Clay says. They're both really into it. It's a good thing.

I watch him, arms crossed, serious.

I'm Gandhi, Toby says.

You're a great Gandhi, Janice says, leaning toward him, her breasts smashed together by her arms.

I think I saw Mike sneak a kiss with that Coley, Janice says to me. That must be sacrilege.

I laugh because I feel like I should. Clay stands there.

I tug at Toby's arm, sure we're on our way.

You can join them, Janice says. They're right up there. She points a few houses up. I squint through the glasses, at a group of five or six kids up the street, moving from one front porch to another. Jesus and Mary Magdalene are the easiest to make out, wire halos circling their heads, lights of streetlamps glinting off the wire. Toby takes a couple steps, then looks at me, asking. I nod. He bows and takes off running up the street, the pillowcase dragging behind. I'm about to yell at him but catch myself. The three of us

stand there for a moment not saying anything, watching our kids up the street. The group turns a corner, Toby in the back. I ask if we should hurry up, follow them.

Clay says, They're supposed to come back around this way.

We face the other direction, wait.

The street's deserted already. I circle around to Clay's side, not wanting to be too close to Janice. Molly had caught me staring at her once. I don't even remember where. It may have been the Tomkin's cookout, but I can't say for sure. I can't even remember what I was staring at on her, just that I was. At the time, I thought it was stupid of Molly to even bring it up and she teased me the whole night. It was nothing and she understood that. Now I feel sick though, don't want to be anywhere near Janice Miller. Don't want to be around any of the other women I checked out behind Molly's back, looking at their asses, listening to their laughs, comparing, judging.

I shuffle closer to Clay, to get Janice out of my peripheral vision. Clay has his arms across his chest. I cross mine, too, then re-cross them, then let them drop. The moon disappears behind some clouds. There are orange streetlamps and tv screens casting a blue tint onto windows. Occasionally a strobe-light from a front porch. Vincent Price dialogue and music lost out there in the wind. I notice that neither of the Millers are costumed so I take off the sunglasses, stick them in my shirt pocket. A wind blows, the night getting colder, but with the glasses off it isn't so dark, and the moon rides out from behind the clouds. It looks like the clouds are still and the moon is speeding along. I open my mouth to talk, to silence what I think's coming about Molly then catch myself and shut up.

We stand there awhile, not talking, hardly breathing.

Then the kids round the corner. Only they aren't walking, they're moving fast, in a mass encircling two people. I can see Toby fighting with someone. His robe flies up, a swim cap pops of his head and a pillowcase of candy scatters across the road.

Jesus, Clay says.

We jog to the kids, shouting *Break it up* and *Calm down*, but by the time we get there, it's over.

Jesus stands over Gandhi, a clenched fist, a bent halo; Mary Magdalene clings to his side.

Toby finds me then stands up, walks away then runs, leaving the pillowcase. I follow him, jogging still, and trip picking up the pillowcase, shoving what candy I can into the bag, a little in shock. I can't keep up though, can't get my legs to move right, the pillowcase tangled up with them and I finally abandon it. I turn as I follow Toby and mime to the Miller's I'll call them, put an invisible phone up to my ear and see Jesus and Mary Magdalene standing there. Clay still has his arms crossed and Janice is next to him. And I wish Molly was here.

When I catch up with Toby, he slows down. He doesn't say anything on the way home and I don't ask him if he wants to talk. I don't want to. A black eye already shows a little. It's visible even in the dark. I'll bring it up tomorrow to try to make him feel better, how I've gotten plenty, one when I was trying to ask his mom out.

When we get to our driveway, I ask him what happened. He's in front of me and goes to the keypad on the garage door. He wants to be away from me but he has to enter the code for the door.

Toby, I say. What happened? He waves me off without turning around, suddenly the image of an older kid.

Hey, I say. Slow down. The garage goes up and I follow him inside, grab him hard by the arm at the door.

What the hell is your problem, tonight, I say.

He looks at me, yanks his arm away, pushes the door closed behind him and I stop it with my foot. I follow him inside. He goes up to his room and shuts the door. I hear the lock click. I wait awhile at the bottom of the staircase, the hall light on, the only light in the house. The heater kicks on. Molly would usually turn it off about now, saving money while we slept. She kept the house cold at night because she liked layers of sheets in bed.

I go up the stairs and knock on Toby's door a few times. He doesn't answer. I go down and watch tv until I fall asleep.

He must've slept in his costume because when he comes down for breakfast he's still Gandhi, just with hair. I cook bacon and watch him out of the corner of my eye, feeling him out. The black eye's beginning to shade yellow, meaning it isn't much of a black eye.

Here, I say. Put this on your eye.

I hand him a bag of peas from the freezer. He snatches the bag away, holds it to his eye, grimacing when he puts it there, acting.

I got a couple of those, I say, but he pays me no attention.

He shifts the peas, not looking at me. Sunlight seeps in the window from above the sink, lays some lines down across the kitchen table, one across Toby's good eye.

Did you try to hit him back? I say. What happened?

Toby's quiet for another minute, the bag crinkling around on his eye. He takes it away and sets it on the table. The streaks of sunlight fade in and out on the kitchen table.

Mike kissed Coley, he says. I told him Jesus wasn't supposed to have a girlfriend. That's right?

I realize it's a question. Right, I say. Yeah, that's right.

He said I needed to stop taking things so seriously and I said he was sucky Jesus.

That's fair, I say.

And he said who cares what I think. My mom's a loon and that's why she's gone now. So I hit him.

I don't know what to say. I pick bacon off the paper towel and put it on another plate with cold toast. I set the bacon and two pieces of toast in front of Toby, along with the grape jelly. He looks at the food, puts the bag of peas down.

I say, Your food's gonna get cold, sport, and leave the room.

Outside, there's the candy from the night before, still in the basket, not even all of it gone. On either side of the street lay smashed pumpkins. One of them was ours, swiped from our porch. I can't figure why they didn't take the candy, too. Molly might have had some theory, but I'm so tired of her popping into my head I don't try to formulate what it might be. Instead I try to picture what Toby's doing inside, if he's eating or just sitting there or remembering me grabbing his arm last night, if maybe he's hoping I'll call him outside. And though I don't want to call him, it's what I should do. I

open the front door, call him to come out. It doesn't feel like *me* calling him, but I'm doing it.

Hey, I say. Toby.

BLACKTAIL

Her parents bought things, baby crap, monitors, a changing station and clothes, and though Katie had wanted to leave Iowa before, she didn't want to leave when her family was helping out so much, so we hung around. Then the next month her period came. Katie's doctor explained that the new birth control may have given us a strange reading, and then he told us the more likely reason for the positive tests was that she had had a chemical pregnancy, where pregnancy hormones are present, but that's all. Her period should now have cleaned her out, he explained. That's when I decided it was time to go. Katie agreed. I had a job waiting in Flathead Valley in Montana that needed a geologist to scout a possible mining operation. I remember being glad for a lot things then. We were away from her family, there was no baby, and I was finally putting my degrees to use.

In mid-summer, we moved into a house situated in a valley off a gravel road called Farm-to-Market Avenue. Our place was small, two bedrooms, and all cold wood floors. We covered the floors with thick rugs that Katie said would make a difference in the winter. We had a small attic that someone had converted into a family room. We used it only for boxes and junk, the baby furniture that her mother had bought, the crib, dresser, and changing station. Pines surrounded the house and it was always dark inside, even with all the blinds up.

We stayed in the first couple months, holding close to each other, but not saying much. It was the first time either of us had lived in another state. Katie grew her brown hair long and her face looked different with so much hair, thinner, older.

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I worked out of a cabin with a two other guys, Daryl and Tad. They each brought flasks to work and I brought Katie most days to get her out of the house. She hadn't found a job yet and Daryl and Tad didn't mind. Katie liked the cabin. It had an old-fashioned black stove that we built a fire in, and she made us tea and cooked us hotdogs in the fire while we played euchre. The cabin had windows on all sides except the back, and my desk, equipped with a laptop, looked out onto a prairie that led to a mountain base. One day I was at my desk, looking at a sample of alluvium sediment and Katie asked what I was doing.

Basically I'm just looking through dirt and sand, I said.

Are you looking for Alkali? she said.

Not even close, I said, and looked up. She had a hotdog on a stick in the fire. It was charred on one side.

You better pay attention to that, I said.

Oh yeah, she said, looking at the hotdog, and then she took the stick, flicked it around, cooling it. The hotdog flipped off and hit me in the chest. I grabbed it and burned my hand.

What the hell? That's hot.

I didn't meant to, she said.

Bullshit.

You're no fun, she said. You know, I'm glad it hit you. I was aiming at you, actually, trying to somehow lodge the hotdog in your right eye socket. I had it all lined up. Katie paused for a minute, playing it straight. I handed her the hotdog and smiled. Let's do something, she said. I want to do something. We should get a gun so I can hunt.

We don't need a gun, I said. I looked at the dirt and sand in the tray on my desk and then I grabbed Katie's hand, took the stick and hotdog from her, threw them into the fire, and we went for a walk.

*

Katie came to work often. The first snow fell early that fall and in the afternoons we walked the base of the Swan Mountains to collect samples. Katie walked with me and it reminded me of being with her in Iowa, before we had moved so close to her parents, before anything with the pregnancy happened. When we were in college, she had wanted to be a painter. She used to take me to places, rundown antique shops, broken farmhouses, junkyards, and I'd follow her, watch her watching things, doing what she called trying to get an angle on things; she was a dedicated artist then, but not a very good one and she eventually gave it up. She sometimes sketched me, or took my picture. I liked the way she looked at me then, focusing hard to draw a cheekbone, getting a line right on my nose.

When she walked with us, I didn't show her rocks or mineral formations or anything; I didn't try to talk to her. I let her come to me, and she did. It was like we were new again, like being away from Iowa in some new place opened things up for us. Sometimes we found things other than rocks. Once, when walking near some trail, we found a cross-country ski.

This is mine, Katie had said. This is so mine. She took the ski and tried to stick her boot into the bindings. She got her foot in there and skied one-legged down small rolls in the fields, falling in the snow. She fell on the ground and said in a british accent, As a girl, I often dreamed about being a Tele-mark skier when I was a girl in Iowa.

Really? I said. Why are you talking like that.

She went on. Yes really, that's what all girls from Iowa dream about. We leave on flat farmland so we have to dream about mountains. You see the logic.

So you wanted to be a skier, I said.

No, she said. Not at all, but it seemed like a dream I could have had.

What did you really dream about?

I don't know, she said, still sitting in the snow. When I was real little, I think I wanted to be a farmer.

I liked your past self better when you wanted to be a skier, I said.

I began to hunt for other things for her. Another time we found a hatchet in a tree, and Katie walked with the hatchet, hacking off tree limbs in the forest, clearing brush and clearing a way for us. She cut her name deep into the bark of a tree, thick slashes in the wood. She broke through the ice in a pond with the back end of the hatchet. When she got tired of the hatchet, she dropped it.

You're not going to keep this, I said, picking the hatchet off the pine needles.

What for? she said, and walked on.

You should keep a collection of the stuff you find, I said. You could decorate the cabin with it.

You keep it then, she said. It's only fun for a minute. What am I going to do with a hatchet?

I kept the hatchet and put it in the attic.

Another time it was a bucket hanging from a tree, filling up with sap, which Daryl stole to make syrup with. We saw blacktail deer several times, a sturdier, bigger animal

than Midwest deer, and Katie tried to take pictures. She took pictures of birds, stray dogs, squirrels. A couple times she tried to photograph fish in a creek. She talked about photographing a bear or deer. When we came across blacktail, Katie's pictures always came out a blur, the deer sprinting off. Katie would look at her digital camera, show me the blurry photograph, and she'd say, I can't ever get a good one. And she'd go off on her own, taking pictures of the trees and mountains.

I let Katie be when it seemed like that was what she wanted. Walking with Daryl and Tad, though, I began to enjoy things again, watching the fog lift off the valley to hang around the high peaks. In each direction, there were mountains, and if you looked at them the wrong way, they felt like walls.

*

One afternoon when Katie didn't come to work, I hunted for mineral deposits with Daryl and Tad. We found a dead moose instead, the body preserved in the snow, the antlers still intact. The moose lay on a downslope of land, near the forest, and its head pulled backward toward its spine, like it had slipped coming down from the woods and broken its neck.

Let's say we killed it, Daryl said.

I don't own a gun, I said.

My wife made me get one when we moved up here, Tad said. It's a little revolver. We could say I shot it.

I don't think that would do the trick here, Daryl said, watching the moose. Unless you and the moose were playing Russian roulette or something.

Daryl knelt down next to the moose and searched for wounds, buckshot or anything. His hands crawled through the fur of the thing, messing it. On the back left haunch of the animal a patch of fur had been scraped away, leaving a large scabbed area of skin. Daryl shook his head, finding nothing.

Let's cut his head off and mount it, Daryl said, still kneeling, holding the antler's with his right hand like he was posing for a photo.

How are we going to cut the fucking head off a moose? I said.

With a saw, Daryl said.

It's not like a piece of wood, I said. You can't just saw it right off. There's bone to get through.

It'll be messy, Daryl said. It'll be messy as hell, but I know a guy in town who'll fix it all up, stuff it and everything.

I pictured the moose-head mounted on the wall of our little cabin, overlooking our desks and laptops, and I liked the thought of it. I didn't like the idea of cutting off the head, though. I looked at Tad. He held a notepad to his chest, his arms clasped tight around the pad. He wore thick earmuffs that his wife must've given him, and a rugged looking heavy flannel coat. His hands and his face were soft, though, almost womanish. He stuck a pen in his mouth and shrugged and said, Okay. Let's do it. He put the pad in his backpack and we hurried back to my house to get a saw.

Our garage was a two car, separate from the house and the door wasn't electric-powered. We only had one car, a Jeep SUV, and the other side of the space was empty. Daryl and Tad stood behind me, talking about where we could mount the head in the

cabin. I pushed the garage door up too fast, and it crashed into place, knocking shovels and saws from the back wall, leaving a clanging echo in the garage. It was dark inside, and when my eyes adjusted, I saw Katie huddled in the empty side of the garage, a large coke next to her on the ground and a hamburger in her hand. She was trying to get a small goat to come to her. She wore long pajamas and her heavy winter coat and scarf. She was crying, too. Daryl and Tad went quiet behind me. My face flushed.

We'll be on the front porch, Tad said.

Hi Katie, Daryl said, and their feet crunched away on the snow and gravel. I stepped into the garage and pulled the string for the light. The little goat looked at me, shivering. It was small, too small, a premature goat.

What's this doing here? I said.

He was wandering around, Katie said, wiping tears off her cheeks with her left hand, her right hand holding the Whopper. He's a baby, she said. I think he's lost.

The goat looked from me to the ground, swinging his head slow. Its legs were thin and knotty, like dead tree branches.

Why were you in the dark?

I don't know, she said.

Why'd you bring him in here?

Can you stop asking questions? she said.

We didn't say anything for a minute. Outside the quiet of the garage, the wind hissed and inside a faint little voice, like from a radio, echoed. A puddle of light from her cell phone glowed on the hood of the Jeep, and I picked the phone up, still on, the voice coming out of it. Her mother's number on the screen.

We should keep him, she said. I think it would be a good idea if we keep him.

Why? I said, looking at the phone.

I mean because we should take care of something and raise it.

I didn't look at her; I had thought everything with the baby was past. I think you left her on hold, I said, handing Katie the phone.

She grabbed the phone, told her mother that she would call her back. Tthe wind blew and the garage door shook. Katie rubbed her cheeks with the palm of her hands, the hamburger still in her right hand, gripped between thumb and pointer-finger.

You're gonna get grease on your face, I said.

She stared at me and threw down the burger. The goat sniffed it. I walked to the back of the garage. In front of the jeep, shovels and hoes and saws were scattered on the cement. I reset them on the wall, for some reason trying to be very quiet. Then I picked a bow-saw and walked by Katie. I turned back before opening the garage and said, I don't think they like meat. You might try a little grass from the yard. I opened the garage door.

I know they don't like meat, she said. I wasn't feeding him the hamburger. I was using the lettuce.

You might try a little grass from the yard, I said.

And all the grass is dead. There's snow covering everything.

Well, keep trying the lettuce then, I said. Do you want this closed?

She nodded and I pulled down the garage door.

I got the guys from the porch and we drove back to the moose, a little rain sprinkling down, washing away the snow, patches of grass and rock showing on the fields beside the road. On the way, Tad asked if Katie was okay and I didn't answer him because I didn't know the answer. Part of me wanted to be back there with her, and the other part wanted to be far away from whatever it was she was feeling. Daryl got to talking on the moose, saying we should cut off the head, and for most of the drive, I thought it was a good idea. Daryl kept going, telling about a deer he killed with his Bronco in Denver, how he got venison for a year, and when he stopped, Tad said that his wife didn't like it up here at first either.

The people are different, he said.

She likes it fine, I said. It's just cold.

When we got to the moose, its head heavy against the snow, its one eye glazed white and looking at us, I knew I couldn't cut the head off. I thought of Katie with the goat; I thought of her dog and cats in Iowa, how they always wanted to be near her, how she had once wanted an animal called a sugarglider. I thought of her standing behind me, watching me, and I didn't want to see the moose opened up, having to hold the animal's head steady, the skin coming loose, the rasping sound of cutting through bone, blood leaking everywhere. It looked like it would take a while, too. We decided we would just cut off the antlers, to keep things cleaner. Daryl sawed. He cut them off just above where the antler met the head. I didn't expect it, but the antlers bled and bled.

*

In Iowa, I worked in Katie's mother and father's butcher shop. The shop was called Cline's. Her father, Owen Cline, also owned the town paper, but her mother told me they

didn't have a position for me there. So I told Mrs. Cline I would handle the finances of the butcher place, but I wouldn't work with all the meat. I don't know why I said this. I didn't mind cutting meat. It may have had something to do with having a master's degree; a person with a master's degree doesn't cut meat all day. When I told her I would be glad to handle the finances and the marketing of the place she started laughing.

The finances? she said. The marketing? Oh, we gotta take you to Mr. Klegg.

Two days later we drove in Owen's pickup down to a farm on the edge of town, in the middle of Iowa flatland. I wondered what kind of farmwork Mrs. Cline was going to have me do, and thought it stupid of her and immature not to tell me the reason for taking me to a farm. Mrs. Cline has a flat, oval face, and she kept her lips pursed as we drove, as though she was holding a surprise for me in. I turned the radio on and she turned it down a little.

Then she said, We get the cows from another place now, already slaughtered, but I wanted you to see how we used to do it. You've been in school most of your life, so you've probably never had to do work like this. Has Katie ever told you about the farmwork she did for Mr. Klegg?

I told her no.

This is part of it, she said.

It was nearing sundown when we got to the place, the sky white and grey, the farmhouse and barn the only thing for miles. Rows of soybeans stretched away on the other side of the road and it looked as though you could walk right off the earth. A dead tree, stark as bone, stood in the middle of the field. I waited in the driveway of the farmhouse while Mrs. Cline got Mr. Klegg from around back.

Klegg was a very old, very short man who wore glasses, and when he shook my hand, he looked past me, like he was trying to see something behind me. They took me to the barn that looked like hell on the outside, the paint stripped from the wood, but was clean inside, hard-packed dirt floors and cleaned out pens, even the stench of livestock wasn't terrible. At the back of the barn, Klegg brought out a cow, its head with rope around it, almost like a dog's muzzle. We walked out the back of the barn, passing the other animals, and the smell of shit and hay grew fainter. Flies buzzed around the cow's ass. I walked at Klegg's side and Katie's mother walked behind us. We stopped at the end of the fence surrounding the barn where Klegg had laid out three pails of cold water, a length of chain, a hoist, a 30-06 rifle, and a large knife. He told me and Mrs. Cline to grab everything except the rifle, which he picked up and carried. I grabbed the water pails, which I later learned were to hold the heart, liver, and kidney. I stuck the knife in my back pocket, the handle up underneath my shirt. Mrs. Cline grabbed the hoist and chain. We walked on, Klegg leading, water from the pails spilling onto my jeans. We walked far, down into a pasture behind the barn, toward a large tree with a long thick limb extending out parallel with the ground. My heart raced. The cow seemed to sense something, something about the strangeness of being away from the other animals, surrounded by the three of us. We stopped when we got to the tree; there were striations on the thick limb, bark rubbed away from where other cows had hung up to drain.

This'll be your first one, Mrs. Cline said, coming around the animal to us. We'll teach you how to butcher it start to finish.

I said that they didn't have to do this for me.

This isn't for you, Mrs. Cline said. We do a cow every year for Mr. Klegg. She looked at Klegg.

Every year, he said, checking something on the gun. Klegg looked at us. Step back you two, he said. Then he looked at me. If you need to walk away, just walk away.

Without thinking, I asked if the cow would feel anything and then felt foolish for asking. Klegg stopped, lowered the rifle, and took my question in a serious manner, rubbing his forehead with the palm of his right hand.

Not if you do it right, he said. You just watch me. We'll make sure we get it the first time.

*

After the goat came, Katie changed. She kept him in the garage, chained up. He pissed and shit in the garage and I had to clean it. I found her out there feeding him, talking to him, asking if he wanted to go on a walk. And she took him on walks, at first just around our yard, then up and down our street in the snow. When she came inside the house, she smelled like goat and hay. She wore worn jeans and turtlenecks and was quiet even when she spoke. She was distant, like there really had been a baby and it was miscarried or lost in some other way. I stopped her one day on her way to the goat.

Is he a permanent thing, I said. Don't you think we need to a find a place for him.

He's my job now, Katie said. He's what I do. You know, I thought about taking care of some other strays.

You can't do that, I said.

You get to go to work everyday so I get to take care of him.

You can come to work with me still, I said. You can get a job.

I don't want a job, she said. I want to do this.

*

In November, Daryl, Tad and Katie and I hiked onto a man named Ronnie Telford's ranchland without knowing it. We didn't know Telford then, but we would. We were walking to a part of Blacktail Mountain shorn off by a glacier, granite rock exposed. We hiked through an area of woods and then came across a stretch of field, Telford's fence down. Farmland cut into the middle of the forest, bisecting it for about a hundred yards. We walked on, and I was surprised at how quickly the land opened up. Behind us, Blacktail stood ringed in clouds. In the distance, to our right in the valley, sat a one-story house, looking part of the land, and a road, and then a white Ford truck bouncing toward us. We all four stopped and watched it coming. The truck ducked down and up from the long hilly road leading up to the house. It moved fast, faster than I first thought. The diesel growled in the distance and smoke billowed out of the back of the truck, the engine getting louder, the truck going faster, dirt and rocks spewing from under the tires. Tad put his hands up. Katie did the same.

He's not going to shoot us, I said.

Then why's he driving so fast? Tad said.

The truck suddenly cut off the road, an explosion of dust behind it, and headed right at us. I got scared and raise my hands. Daryl's went up, too. The truck slowed down when all our hands went up, and Katie laughed, Tad let out a breath, and we all lowered our hands. Then the truck sped up again, kicking rocks from beneath the tires, spinning out in the dirt, and Tad said, Run. And I turned to go.

He's messing with us, Daryl said, grabbing my coat. It's cool.

The truck fishtailed to a stop. A skinny man with a beard and a flannel shirt rolled down his window. He asked us our business on his property. Daryl and I stepped forward, and I showed him my papers, just notes really, and an old USGS card and explained about looking for outcropping mineral deposits or any deposits under heavy sediment or regolith. He squinted his eyes at me and looked confused. Behind him in the truck hung an empty gun rack.

A company hired us to find a place to mine, I said.

Any luck? he said.

Not a thing, Tad said. Sorry we're on your property.

The man squinted at Tad, then looked back to me. He handed me my card from the cab of his truck, nodded, and said, Just ask if you're going to pass through my land. He was about to drive off when Katie spoke up.

What kind of farm do you have? she said.

It's a ranch, he said. We've got horses mainly.

I used to ride horses, she said. My dad used to take me out.

We do rides here, the ranch man said. It's a little way to make money. I could set you up if you all wanted.

Do you have any goats? Katie said.

We've got a few goats, he said. A lot of folks around here have goats. My brother lives in Copper Falls and he's got goats in a residential area, just in his backyard.

We have one, she said.

We don't *have* one, I cut in. We're looking to give one away. It's a stray.

A stray goat? Daryl said.

Katie looked at me. I found one is what I meant to say, she said, looking back at the ranch man. Just a baby one. I can't get him to eat.

I'd be happy to take a look at him, the ranch man said. He didn't say anything for a minute, then he swung his arm, motioning to Katie. Let's go take a look at him, he said.

Katie climbed in the cab of the truck. They shook hands and I heard the man say, Ronnie Telford. Katie smiled at him and said her name. She leaned across the seat, near to the ranch man, shoulder to shoulder, and said to me, I'll meet you at home. They drove off, back toward the ranch house.

She seems happy today, Tad said.

Had she not before? I said.

*

Some weekends we watched her parents' house. They had a condo on Lake Michigan and took a boat up there once a month. We looked after the dog and two cats and got to stay in the two-story house. It was an antique thing. Around every corner sat a wood end table with a lamp and doily and a photo on it. Faded black and white photographs of people and old houses hung on the walls in the family room. An old brick fireplace, blackened and cracking, sunk to one side in the family room. When we thought Katie was pregnant, her parents still took the trip to Lake Michigan, and stayed longer than usual. I think it was her father's idea. They stayed away for about a week, to give us time to talk things through. We didn't talk though. We pretended the problem wasn't there. Or we pretended it wasn't a problem.

Katie went on walks a lot or went to the Y to swim. She said this was because she needed to be out of her parents' house. She'd come back, smelling of chlorine each day, her hair still wet. She didn't take showers and said the pool got her clean. It was clear to me that not only did she want to be out of the house, she didn't want to be around me. And I suspected things then. I suspected the chlorine-smell maybe hid some other smell. I thought she might be seeing some other swimmer, doing laps with him, or synchronized swimming, or letting one of the lifeguards watch her body.

After she got home one afternoon and was sitting on an upstairs bed, dripping into the comforter, I asked if she'd mind if I swam with her.

Actually, I would mind, she said, ruffling her still wet hair. Nobody's ever there when I go in the morning. It's my own thing. You go under water, you stay under, and it's like your own little world down there, and you can *feel* that world, feel it against your limbs.

Limbs, I thought when she was talking. What a word.

It's quiet and different and it's yours, she said. Plus, I've never known you to be too into exercise.

So there's not some good looking lifeguard, I said.

You're a perverted idiot, she said.

How's that perverted? I said. Your use of the word *limbs* is perverted.

Is it going to be like this? she said, standing up, the butt of her bathing suit sagging. Is it going to be like this when I have the baby?

I told her it probably was and she went off to take a walk.

I remember, when Katie was gone somewhere during the day, walking around the house, looking at the empty rooms. There were rooms no one used anymore. A living room with neat beige furniture, an oriental rug, and a coffee table. The sofa faced two windows with a view of the flat fields behind the house, and when the sun set, the room turned yellow. Katie told me about playing with her dog in there, but I couldn't picture it. Three bedrooms upstairs with neatly made beds and large oak dressers. Leaves of a nearby tree made shadows in the room farthest down the hall, and I sat in there a lot, listening to the tree rustle in the breeze. In that room, I found two rusted pistols in a drawer, a broken light gauge device, a box of bullets, an inhaler, fountain pens, pictures of when Katie was little, eyes wide and smiling, and two degrees that Katie's father had taken, one in journalism, the other in business. The other drawers were full of stuff, too. The bedrooms had turned into junk rooms, places for storage, nothing more.

*

Ronnie Telford had run a ranch for nearly twenty-five years. He was our parents' age and had lived in Montana all his life. His second wife, Tammy, helped him run the ranch; his first died in a skiing accident, though Telford told us little of that. He had two children with his first wife, both girls, and they were away at college.

Once a week or so, Telford brought a small bale of hay for the goat. He gave it shots, and a de-wormer, but wouldn't take the thing. He and Katie talked in the garage, standing around with the goat. Sometimes I went in, but I didn't say much, I just listened to the two of them. Katie stopped coming to work with me.

I got home from the cabin each day to find Katie and Ronnie and Tammy outside building a small fence on the back of the garage. At the back of the fence, they put up a

little shelter, a little hut, and filled it with hay. A week or so into the work, they got the whole thing pretty much finished just as I got home. I walked up to the fence, rested on it, and was about to say that it looked good, when Telford said, Hey, would you mind getting some bedding down here? She wants bedding in here.

I wanted to tell him to go get the bedding himself, but I said yes, and went inside to the loft filled with boxes. The antlers we had cut from the dead moose were in a corner of the room on the floor. Next to the antlers was the hatchet Katie had found. I was supposed to mount both the antlers and the hatchet, bring them to the geology cabin, but I hadn't done it yet. I reminded myself to do this and then searched for old bedding. In the first box, I found a good blender, and set it out, along with three pairs of broken earphones, and sketches Katie made. The first two were of me, looking away from her. In one, I sat on some stairs, talking on the phone, my eyes looking at the ground. In another, I stood, looked out a window. I could tell the window was from our old apartment. I didn't remember doing either of these things, but it didn't matter. That Katie had drawn them mattered; that I had somehow captured her attention, her love, in those moments – I wanted that back. I flipped through the drawings. Other sketches: her mother walking the dog; her father in their backyard; a whole assortment of Iowa landscapes; a pond; a field with snow; ducks in the sky; a woman and a boy on a road in the small town.

What're you doing? Katie shouted from downstairs.

I put the sketches away. I found a blender, I said.

Bring the bedding, she said, coming up the stairs. Isn't this great? It's pretty much finished; we could probably have a couple more goats. Or a dog or whatever. She came up further into the loft and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

We don't need any more goats, I said. We don't need anymore anything.

You suck sometimes, she said, and grabbed the bedding from me.

After giving the bedding to her, I walked down our driveway to get the mail. When I came back up, Ronnie was loading tools and extra fence slats and wood into his truck. His wife said goodbye to me, and got into the cab of the truck. I walked up to the truck, put my hands on the bed. I asked him why he didn't take the goat.

Your wife wants it, he told me. And I don't need anymore goats. I'm scaling back. I'm nearing retirement, he said, showing his teeth, one front tooth with a little black hole in the top of it. Hey, he said. Tell Katie we'll be ready for dinner around seven. Just stop by any time before then.

I told him okay and went inside to ask Katie about dinner.

*

Sometime after Thanksgiving, a package arrived for Katie. She was gone, at the Telford's, and I opened it. The box contained a videotape and a small note, written on a piece of scrap paper, that read, *Katie, We thought you'd like this. Hope it's not too cold up there. Go skiing, go to the Y, get some exercise, you'll feel better. We'll visit soon; we want to do a cross country trip. And let us know how the goat is? Love, M and D.*

It was her mother's handwriting. When her mother called and I answered the phone, she didn't acknowledge me, didn't ask me how I was, what I had been up to, or

even what we had been up to. The note was addressed only to Katie and that annoyed me, made me want to throw it out, along with the tape. I didn't though. I cooled down.

I decided to wait for Katie to watch the tape, so I put on coffee, then decided I wouldn't wait and sat in the family room, on one of our heavy rugs, and put in the tape. It began with a view of her house in Iowa, and I couldn't believe someone would send such a thing. We had just moved, after all. After watching a minute though, the tape felt gentle to me, desperate even. The camera zoomed close to a fuzzy window, then zoomed out again, bringing almost the entire house in clear, the white siding dirty in spots, the blue shutters around the windows faded grey. A wind was going and the tall tree on the right side of the house rustled. The tree trunk bent in the middle, away from house, as if trying to get out of shade, and I had never noticed this before. The camera danced from the tree to the house. Wind made a hollow gushing sound in the camera, but other than that, there was no voice, no commentary. I wondered about that for a second, but then knew there didn't need to be a voice. Katie already knew all the details. The camera readjusted, followed the path of the front walk up to the front door, then panned up to the roof. Slow. The hand of the camera tried to remain steady but jerked up to the top windows, but still, the camera moved around the house like a blind man hand's would, feeling it out, loving it. A quick cut to a shot of the empty road leading to the house, a soybean field to the left, a white and blue sky, clouds motionless, and again, no other sound but the wind. I got a sense of the quietness of things. Then the dog jumped into the shot and Mrs. Cline's voice said to sit, sit. The dog whined and barked, its nose in the camera. The next shot began in the upstairs bedroom, the one I liked to sit in, and the camera zoomed in close to the window. I could see the shadows of leaves in the window.

Inside the house, it was even quieter, and as the camera panned around the room, I could hear Mrs. Cline's feet shuffling and her breathing. The camera stayed in the room, zooming in on the bedspread, along the corner of the blue wall, to the oak dresser, then panned out finding the whole room. In a corner of the room, above the bed on the dull white ceiling was a water stain. The tape went on like this, recording each room, ending with a shot of the backyard. Katie fell asleep to it that night, and each night afterward for a week or so.

*

Six bears? Katie said.

Six, Ronnie said, pouring himself another cup of some spiked cider. Two with a bow, he said. But I used all that goddamn meat. And I've used the hides. This one here, the big guy, I kept. The other ones, I gave away. That animal gave its life.

We sat in the Telford's house around a coffee table, behind Katie a fire in the fire place. Out one of the windows, Blacktail Mountain was visible in the darkening sky. When I looked out the window the first time, I thought it was night, but I was really looking at the dark of the mountain, and when I went close up to the window, a grey afternoon sky outlined Blacktail. It was a strange feeling, that mountain looming so close to the house. On the walls of the Telford's place were all the typical things. A couple deerheads, antlers, and we sat on a bearskin rug, one of Ronnie's, the big guy he kept calling it. A wood gun case with a glass door sat in the corner of the room, in place of a china closet. The house made our geology cabin, with the little stove and the laptops on plastic desks, look ridiculous.

He's never even picked up a gun, Katie said, looking at me. He wouldn't cut meat at my parents butcher shop.

Ronnie smiled, his teeth showing, that little black hole at the top of his front tooth. He and Katie were doing all the talking. Tammy got up either to get more cider or to bring out more cheese and crackers. The cheese, some block of white stuff, was very good.

I prefer not dealing with dead animals all day, I said.

You're not a vegetarian, Ronnie said. We've got some good elk I wanted you to taste.

I shook my head. No, I said. I like meat.

Ronnie laughed hard. Well, I like meat, too, he said, and continued laughing. I like meat, he said. That's funny. He slapped me on the back and got serious looking. It's the blood, he said. I know. It's got a smell to it, even all cleaned up. I don't enjoy that part of it.

I felt like saying I had a degree in geology, two really, but I didn't. I didn't like being in the Telford's house. It was a forty-five minute drive from our house and meeting at their place was becoming a regular thing. I'd already missed a couple euchre nights with Daryl and Tad.

The first thing I killed was a squirrel, Ronnie said. I was maybe ten or twelve or so. I killed it with just a twenty-two, picked it out of a tree. I was a good shot even then. Well, I was going to leave that little piece of shit. I was ten or whatever. No respect for this animal. No idea I'd just took its life.

My dad had me kill a deer with him when I was about ten, Katie said, sounding like a little girl. We butchered it together. He taught me how to hide the thing, drain it, do it all.

Ronnie leaned on the coffee table with both elbows. That's the way to do it, he said. I can tell something about your old man right there. My own dad wasn't quite like that. He wasn't as hands on and there as yours, he said.

The women were listening hard. Ronnie's face flickered in the firelight.

After I shot that squirrel, well I'm off to shoot something else, he said. But my father finds that squirrel, and he can see the gunshot in it. He finds me around the house, aiming at god knows what. I remember that. He found me lining up some other animal. To this day, I don't remember what, but there I am, lining up this other animal after I killed this little squirrel. And he yanks the gun out of my hands, empties the bullets, and tells me I can't shoot another goddamn thing until I finish that squirrel. So I go to throw the thing away, thinking I'll toss the fucker in the trash. No. No deal. He makes me skin the thing, gut it, build a fire, cook the thing, and eat it. I didn't shoot another thing for a year.

Katie kept her eyes on Ronnie, waiting. Ronnie grabbed my right shoulder hard, smiling across the table into the fire, his eyes set in shadow.

*

Another tape from Iowa arrived. Katie watched it then put it upstairs in the junk room with the first tape, the deer antlers, the hatchet, the baby furniture. She went to Telford's a couple times a week or more and we scheduled New Years with them, after they got back from a trip to visit Ronnie's daughters. I found myself alone in the house after work

most days. I often went upstairs and got the tapes. I'd sit with the lights off, watching our old campus pass by on video, trying to see us into the little shops, walking along the roads, before we had any worries, when it was just the two of us, when we lived slow. The tape cut from our campus to the little town, into the Cline's butcher shop where a man I've never seen before waved at the camera, and then the camera dove back out onto the street, and I tried to put us back there, together, when we liked to be together so much, but in my head all I could see was Katie. The memory of her walking on the Iowa street; the moon in the sky lighted her face grey. I wanted to be back there, in Iowa. I remembered walking back from the butcher shop, how she came to meet me and walked me home. She stopped to look in a window at clothes. There were two of her, one on the sidewalk, one in the window.

*

Let's play euchre tonight with Tad and Daryl, I said. We haven't seen them much lately.

You see them everyday, Katie said.

This is true, I said. But that's in a work environment.

A work environment? she said. All you guys do is jerk off all day.

I think you're confused, I said. That's what you do all day.

She took a spoonful of yogurt. Have you tried the key lime pie kind? she said. It's delicious, and flung a spoonful of yogurt at me. It hit my shirt. She laughed. I'm sorry, she said. I am. She wiped the yogurt off my shirt and said, I'm going to the Telford's tonight, she said. You can come if you want. You know, I want you to come.

I washed my hands in the sink and she put a hand on the back of my neck. Why? I said.

Because I want to be with you, she said.

At the Telford's, I said.

I already told them I'd be there.

Why do you like it there? I said. It's cheesy and silly and all Ronnie does is tell old war stories.

Jesus, she said. It's better than here. It makes me feel like I'm at home.

How's that possible? I said. There are dead animals staring at you from every angle of the place.

It's possible. And those animals were killed for food, she said. You better get used to it, too. He asked me to help out on the ranch and I think I'm going to do it.

Do whatever you want, I said, and walked outside to get away from her.

Neither of us went anywhere that night, and I slept upstairs in the loft, surrounded by boxes.

*

Sometime before Christmas, I heard Katie get up early. We'd been sleeping in separate rooms. I had taken the loft upstairs, the converted living room. We didn't have a sofa up there, but I put all the boxes into a crawl space and made a bed on the ground with blankets, the crib and baby furniture in the corner of the room.

I woke up to the sound of the front door opening and closing, and I went to small triangular window. I saw our Jeep SUV in the driveway, and Katie and Ronnie were piling suitcases into the back of it and into the backseats. It was early, snow had

recovered the other snow, making everything white again. A grey light made shadows down in the pines. Everything was quiet. My little room was quiet, and I could just hear the noises Katie and Ronnie made putting the suitcases in the car; their feet had already cleared a path in the snow from the front door to the back of the Jeep, and I listened to the gravel sound. They said little. I put my ear up to the window and felt the cold. They made trip after trip, first the suitcases, then boxes of things, stereo stuff, movies, and I listened to all the junk quietly rattling when they brought it out. I closed my eyes and listened to it. Then I opened my eyes and watched. Katie must've not been able to see in my window. Sometimes she looked up to the loft to see if my light had come on. She'd stop what she was doing and stand, looking up to my window. It was strange to see her face looking that way, watching for me. After some time, I went downstairs, went out the backdoor and stood by the car. She came from the front door and saw me right away.

I'm not moving out, she said.

I didn't say you were, I said.

I'm just taking some of our stuff to the Telford's. They want me to watch their place while they're on vacation. I'm taking care of the goats and horses and everything. It's just for a little while, she said.

You're taking a lot of stuff for a little while, I said. Are you sure you need it all?

Probably not, but I just want to be sure. It's my stuff anyway.

So let's be sure then, I said. I went inside and Ronnie was huddled over some drawer in the kitchen. He looked at me. I started in the family room. I grabbed all the National Geographic's that were hers and put them in a box. I pulled some decorative tea

set down from the bookshelf, a tea set I'd bought, and put that in. I filled the box up with cds, mine, hers, it didn't matter. I went upstairs and grabbed the hatchet she'd found, the moose antlers and put those in the box. Then I brought the box out to the car. My hands were freezing holding the thing, and I dropped it in the back of the Jeep. Clouds broke in the sky and I saw a little blue behind the grey covering.

That's not all mine, she said. I don't want any antlers.

I got them for you, I said.

You didn't get them for me.

Ronnie clapped his hands together and said, Anything else?

Yeah, I said. There's a lot more. Fuck. There's fucking plenty more.

Let's go, Ronnie, Katie said. This is all I need.

Ronnie looked at me, then he went and got in his truck. Katie got the box I had just put in the Jeep and set it in the snow.

Take this back in, she said.

I didn't pay her any attention and went back inside the house. I could see my breath in the air. There's a lot more of your shit, I yelled out to Katie, standing in the family room, no longer angry, just tired and embarrassed. I heard the Jeep start up and then Ronnie's diesel truck. I waited until I heard the truck going and then went outside again. Ronnie's truck was already down the driveway, signaling to turn onto the road. I was glad he was gone. The tires of the Jeep crunched snow and Katie tapped the brakes, rolled down her window.

It's only for a few weeks, she said. I'll invite you for dinner some nights. Ronnie told me I can cook whatever deer meat I want.

I didn't say anything for a minute. Exhaust from the jeep curled around my legs.

Take care of the goat, she said, and started to roll up her window.

I'll surprise you, I said fast, putting my hand on the window.

She didn't say anything to this. Her window buzzed and rolled down again and I took my hand away.

I'll get Daryl to drive me and I'll just surprise you, I said.

She smiled at me and then rolled up her window, waved, and drove off.

I picked up the box off the ground and brought it inside. I sat on the rug in front of the television. Snow clung to the bottom of the box and melted into the carpet. I thought about Katie living in the Telford's house, cooking herself dinner, feeding the horses on the ranch, taking care of the few chickens they had. I thought about her alone, moving through their rooms, maybe looking in their drawers, trying on some of Tammy's clothes, wearing overalls to do ranch-work, stepping into Ronnie's boots for a quick walk to get the mail. I went upstairs and got the videos her mother had sent. I decided that I might drive them over and bring the goat, too; I'd help out with the ranch and feed the animals and we'd ride horses and I'd get my work done that way. But it would be her way, too. Then I realized I didn't have a car. I sat on the floor again, the videos in my lap, and pictured the drive over with Daryl, how I'd wait to do it for a few days, maybe a week, but then go around dusk. I would wander the property like a stranger, pretending to be lost and in need of shelter, would creep close to the house and peek in the windows, and see her through a window as though I'd never seen her before; I'd watch her doing whatever she might be doing, watching tv, calling her parents, sleeping, and then I'd just walk right in.